落第騎士の英雄譚（キャバルリィ）

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海空りく
RIKU MISORA
Illust をん

GA文庫

Illustrations

Novel Illustrations

落第騎士の英雄譚（キャバルリィ）
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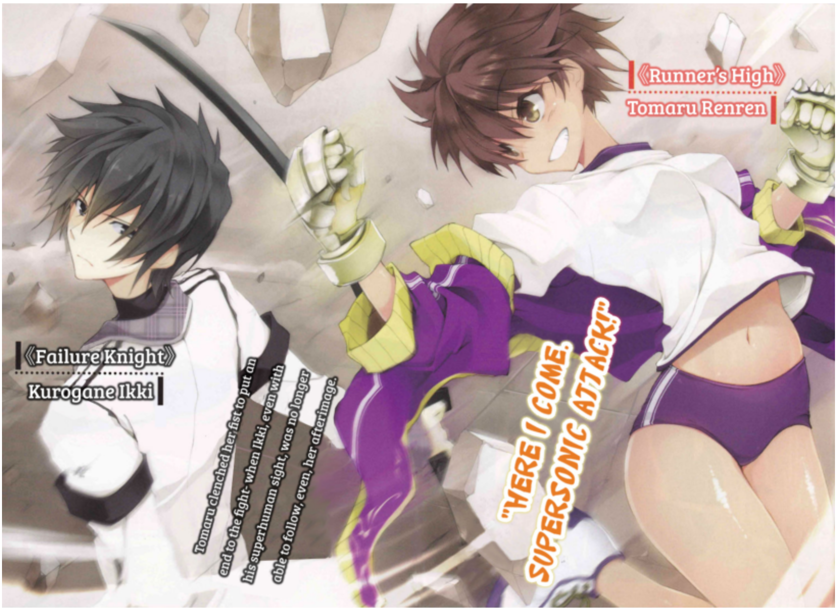《Runner's High》
Tomaru Renren
《Failure Knight》
Kurogane Ikki
"HERE I COME. SUPERSONIC ATTACK!"
Tomaru clenched her fist to put an end to the fight- when Ikki, even with his superhuman sight, was no longer able to follow, even, her afterimage.

"IF IT'S LIKE THIS, WE'LL BE ABLE TO PLAY WITHOUT WORRYING ABOUT THE SURROUNDINGS!"
Ayatsuji Ayase
《Crimson Princess》
Stella

Stella and Ayase, having changed into their respective swimsuits, arrived several minutes later than Ikki.

《The Crimson Lady》
Toutokubara Kanata
"It seems I have been underestimating you a little bit."
《Fifty Fifty》
Misogi Utakata
"Let's do it. I know you have it, a Device."
《Sword Eater》
Kurashiki Kuraudo

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Prologue: Memories of a Distant Day

Standing in the middle of a dojo dyed in the color of mad red, the girl called out to the man before her again and again.

Her voice was filled with distress, but the grizzled middle-aged man laughed cheerfully.

"Hahaha, it's still a hundred years too soon for an opponent to hold back against me. Enough, just come."

"But Father…. Lately your body has been…."

"That's why I want to entrust this technique to you, before I lose the ability to hold a sword completely."

Swaying, the middle-aged man, the girl's father, readied the shinai[1].

"Since I'm no Blazer, I can't be of any help to you but with the sword. This technique is the result of my entire life as a swordsman. It's something I've never shown anyone. It will definitely be of use to you. Accept it, Ayase."

The eyes of the father looking straight at his daughter shined in a warmer color than the mad red of the evening sun.

There was no way she could refuse after being gazed at with such an expression, because she was loved so much.

"I'll do it… Father."

And so, the girl…

"…."

Killing off her unease, she materialized her soul as an ‘Armament', a katana with a scarlet blade redder than sunset and more vivid than blood. Gripping the katana in both of her hands as if she was squeezing it lightly, the girl dashed forward, aiming at her father who stood before her. And just as her father desired, she swung down her sword.

It was something that had happened long ago.

But right now, she had already lost everything. Nothing remained with her. She could not protect anything.

Only the scene from long ago still burnt brightly in her eyes.

References

1. ↑ *Shinai*: a practice sword for kendo made from bamboo strips.

Chapter 1: Disciple

Part 1

"Well folks! The seventh match of today's selection battles will now begin!

"Coming from the blue gate is the one who defeated the C-Rank knight, the 'Hunter' Kirihira Shizuya, who was a representative in last year's Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival. It's the first year F-Rank 'Failure Knight', contender Kurogane Ikki! Till now, he's had eight wins out of eight matches. What's more, except against contender Kirihara, he received no injuries in his matches. But today he'll face an opponent of the same caliber as the Hunter!

"And that is, appearing from the red gate, a member of the Hagun Academy Student Council and a top contender of this year's Festival, second year C-Rank 'Runner's High', Tomaru Renren! Her records are the same as contender Kurogane, eight wins out of eight matches!

"But, Buuut! contender Tomaru was third among the past year's academy ranking! In other words, she is the third strongest knight in this school! Will she show her strength today as her rank states? Or will the Failure Knight win today too with his martial arts powers that defy common sense!? Yanagida-sensei, what do you think?"

"Too long, sleeping."

"Thank you very much! Well then, today's top match… has started!"

The buzzer indicating the start of the match sounded, and loud applause and shouts spontaneously resounded from the audience seats.

As the target of those frenzied echoes, two knights stood in the ring. The boy who stood still while holding the Japanese katana-type Device, Kurogane Ikki. The girl who equipped the knuckle-type Device, Tomaru Renren.

Even though the match had already started, Renren was doing some hops lightly as if she were playing, and called out to Ikki with an affectionate smile.

"Kurogane-kun. I saw your match with the 'Hunter'! That was an awesome match!"

Tomaru's smile was like the light brown color of her tanned skin; it cleared away smoothly. Facing her smile, Ikki also grinned a little in return.

"Thank you very much. Being told that by the third rank Tomaru-san makes me very happy."

"Using honorifics when we're just chatting, you do know we're the same age, right? But still, it's strange. Even though you can fight so well, why did you repeat a grade?"

"…Ahaha, well that's… there were a lot going on and all."

"Fuu~un. Well, I don't know what happened, but it's unfortunate. It would've been more fun if I were in the same grade as someone as strong as Kurogane-kun~"

"If you're talking about strong people, then isn't there Saijou-san who's ranked fourth?"

"That guy's no good. He has crazy physical strength but he can't even touch me with just that. He's just an electric fan… but still, that's the same for Kurogane-kun too. I mean, if you're struggling so much against someone like the 'Hunter', you can't beat me."

Tomaru's gentle smile changed into a ferocious one.

"I'll show you the way the third ranked fights—!"

Suddenly, her figure vanished from Ikki's field of vision.

Was it a stealth skill like *Area Invisible*? No, that was wrong. There is sound. A sound of the right being kicked, something passing through the wind with unbelievable speed. If he looked carefully, he could catch a glimpse of the after-images.

That's right. Tomaru didn't disappear, she just moved so fast that it seemed like she disappeared. That was Tomaru Renren's Noble Art—

"It's *Mach Grid*! Contender Renren suddenly dashed with victory in her eyes!"

The true form of that irregularity was the accumulation of speed. By ignoring the natural deceleration put on her body, Tomaru is able to continuously accelerate.

"I've heard of it before, but for it to be this fast…."

"Seeing it on camera and seeing it like this is completely different right?"

"Yeah, I can't catch up to it…. The reason you talked to me when the match already started was for the steps right? You accumulated the initial speed with those hops."

"Bingo! The weakness of this power is the initial speed, you see. But with those preparations, I could bright up my speed to five hundred kilometers per hour instantly. But five hundred is just the beginning. My Mach Grid shows its real powers after crossing the sound barrier!"

Exactly as stated, she continued to speed to the right, using the walls surrounding the ring. Exploiting the ability to ignore the laws that bind this world, she continued to accelerate. 800, 900, 1000, 1100, —1200! She finally passed the speed of sound, and arrived at the domain of supersonic speed.

Her speed had long passed the level where the human eye could follow it.

"Do you get it? My ability isn't something that lets me disappear like the Hunter. I become both invisible and impossible to catch!

Kurogane-kun who was having trouble against such an enemy can't possibly win against me!"

"Then if I can catch Tomaru-san, will you admit defeat?"

"Haha…! Well that's if you can do it! But you can't! There's no way you can! It's unfortunate, but Kurogane-kun's Festival journey will end here! Let's go, with this supersonic speed attack…!"

By the time Ikki could no longer even grasp the after-images… Tomaru came forward with victory in mind while putting power into her fists. Moving to Ikki's blind spot, she released a strike filled with the highest amount of energy…!

"*Black Bird*!"

While creating a sonic boom, Tomaru aimed her fist at Ikki's back and let loose a supersonic strike.

In speed, it really surpassed Mach 2. It was truly a one shot kill strike that far surpassed the level where it could be seen with one's eyes. Forget about blocking, it was no longer possible to evade, or even react in time.

Tomaru had no doubt about her victory. However—

"That girl's an idiot."

A small-built silver-haired girl stood there, sighing as if making fun of someone.

This adorable girl who reminded you of a bisque doll was Kurogane Shizuku. A B-Rank knight who was called 《**Lorelie** Witch of the Deep Sea》[1] because of her peculiar method of winning, by drowning her opponents. She was Kurogane Ikki's younger sister.

"The reason Onii-sama had a hard time with that person wasn't because he couldn't see him."

But of course, her words didn't reach Tomaru currently reflected on her pupils. It didn't reach, but Tomaru immediately understood the meaning.

Eh?

Tomaru sensed something on her field of vision that couldn't possibly be there. A gaze. In the thin juncture of time, she felt something that stuck her gaze. It was the gaze of Ikki's eyes, which had caught her movements even though she was in supersonic speed!

N-No way!? He reacted!?

The next moment, Ikki's figure vanished from in front of the fist Tomaru struck out. The supersonic punch hit the air, and their figures intersected. With them passing by each other, Ikki grabbed the scuff of Tomaru's windbreaker and by using her supersonic propulsion, he rotated her with one full swing—

And with that momentum, he slammed Tomaru on the stone surface of the ring.

"Kuh-ugh—"

And a black tip was pointed towards Tomaru, who lost her breath after that impact on her back.

"It's my win."

"...."

Tomaru, who had collapsed, could not understand what had just happened. She could not understand how she was caught.

But she understood that she had lost. If Tomaru's Mach Grid was stopped, its propulsion speed would be completely reset. She has to be constantly on the move. She could not bring up her speed from scratch again. The person before her would not allow it.

That's why…Tomaru nodded lightly, and surrendered.

"I-It's oveeeer! It's over too easily! contender Ikki won it by easily bringing down Runner's High, the third rank of Hagun Academy!

It's his ninth victory! Finally the historic moment when someone lower than E-Rank passing the selection for the festival is near!"

"Hey hey, seriously!?"

"For that Tomaru to not even be able to touch him...."

"What the heck is with that F-Rank? Why the heck did that monster repeat a grade!?"

"C-Cool!"

"As expected of Ikki. A match without even a shred of danger."

Among the spectators who were shouting and cheering, one slender man, Arisuin Nagi stood next to Shizuku and clapped for Ikki who was standing in the light.

"In the end, he didn't use Ittou Shura."

"The result was obvious. The reason why Onii-sama had a hard time against that Hunter had nothing to do with whether or not he could see him. It was because he had a long ranged bow in addition to his perfect stealth. It doesn't matter how fast she is, or if he can't see her. There's no way she will be unharmed after stepping into the field of Onii-sama's unique swordsmanship."

For someone of Ikki's level of skill, it was already a close ranged barrier of sword strikes. If there was something close by, a samurai's sharpened sixth sense will definitely react to it, no matter if it is visible or invisible, fast or slow. Failing to read that was the reason why Tomaru lost.

"Good job, Ikki."

Ikki, who was leaving the arena saw a vividly red-haired girl standing next to the blue gate as she welcomed him back.

"My right hand only feels a bit disjointed; I didn't fight so hard that I would feel tired. Stella, do your best too."

"There's no need to try my best though."

After replying with a voice filled with confidence, the girl entered the arena.

"Folks, with the lingering feelings of excitement remaining from before, it's time to start today's eighth selection match! Entering the arena with her blazing red hair swaying is Hagun academy's only A-Rank knight! The 'Crimson Princess', contender Stella Vermillion! Like her roommate the Failure Knight, she also has eight wins with no losses! All of those matches ended with her opponents withdrawing! The sensational supernova who won through with just her pressure, going through all the matches without any decent battles. Buuut! Today her opponent is the Hanaiki Baffalo—!"

Entering the arena from the red gate from where Tomaru had gone through was a giant with a shaved head and a uniform with a high helm.

"Ranked fourth in our Hagun academy and a member of the student counsel, the C-Rank knight nicknamed 'Destroyer', contender Saijou Ikazuchi! Having won through an excellent run of matches, he leisurely stands in front of contestant Vermillion! There is no sign of the tension or excitement that had been seen from the others who fought contender Vermillion! Only the glaring at the opponent he has to defeat! Just like the wall newspaper club guaranteed, ‘No running away for Japanese men', he lives up to the phrase! Completely ready to face contender Vermillion! Could it be that this time, we will finally witness the true power of the Crimson Princess!? Now, with both of them summoning their Devices—Match, START!"

"UWOOOOO!!"

"Whoa! contender Saijou swung his Device *Zanbatou*[2] immediately with the sounding of the start buzzer! The force is so strong that the roar of the blade reached even the seats of the audience!"

"I'll ask, do you know my ability?"

Saijou asked Stella while rotating his *Zanbatou* overhead.

"I don't. Unlike Ikki, I don't research my opponents before the fight."

"Hmph. As expected of the famed A-Rank. Does a C-Rank not interest you?"

"It's not like I'm neglecting you. In the end this fight, and even the Sword-Art Festival, everything is simply training for us to grow stronger and become mage-knights. When confronting terrorists and the like, it's almost impossible for you to know of the opponents abilities beforehand. That's why, if you can't fight without knowing what your opponent's skill is, then that's no good."

"You won't do the initial research because of that, even though you are a first year. Such a noble will. Be that as it may, this time it is futile."

BOOM

Saijou brought down the *Zanbatou* he was revolving overhead towards Stella. There was magic emitting from the rough sword that clashed with Stella's golden blade, *Lævateinn*.

The ‘reason' of the blazers was already at work there.

"My ability is 'accumulation of the power of slashes'. The more I revolve the blade, the heavier it becomes. The current limit is ten tons. The reason for your loss in this battle will be because you let me charge my power to the limits because you didn't know of my ability!"

"It's the *Crescendo Axe*—!"

Accumulating the power of slashes. The slashes just now had enough force to crack open the ground. However—

"But no matter how heavy your slashes are, they're useless if they don't hit, you know."

That's right. This was the reason he loses to the third rank, Tomaru Renren. Certainly, if it's attack power alone, Crescendo Axe is of the highest class. But as for the speed of his fortified *Zanbatou*, it's definitely not fast. He was truly an easy opponent for speed-based fighters like Tomaru. And of course, Stella had plenty of velocity even though it wasn't as much as Tomaru. This type of attack, she could dodge it with her eyes closed.

"But, I'll receive it!!"

"WH-WHAT!?"

CLANG

The downward slashing Crescendo Axe was received by Stella's *Læveteinn*. No, it didn't stop at that. Stella didn't just receive the slash from the *Zanbatou*, she used her might to push it back too.

"Im-Impossible!?"

He lost in strength. Saijou was shocked at that fact.

Yes, Saijou didn't know, because the single time when Stella fought seriously was when she fought Kurogane Ikki, and Saijou was not present there. Because he only saw the pictures taken by the students or the blurry uploaded movies on the streaming sites.

—That Stella was someone who could shake the Earth itself with just one strike of her sword!

"It would do you good to remember this, Sempai."

Stella pushed back the *Zanbatou* and stretched her hand toward the now defenseless Saijou, touching the upper helm.

"Power, talent, techniques, I will bring down everything while facing them head on. I am an A-Rank exactly because I can do something like that."

Instantly, fire blazed out from the hand that touched the helm. The collar snapped, and Saijou's body blasted 10 meters up in the air and then fell out of the ring.

Saijou, who was now covered in soot, lay unmoving. He lost consciousness at that close distance explosion.

"The match is over! Winner, Stella Vermillon!"

Realizing that fact quickly, the referee immediately judged the match to be over and announced the winner.

"A-Again, complete victoryyy!! Even though contender Saijou daringly wished for a head on battle, he wasn't even an opponent for her! This is world level! This is the highest rank! Strong, way too strong! The first years this time are way too strong!! If it's her, if it's them! They could earn our Hagun Academy the crown of the Seven Stars Sword King after all these years it has been out of our reach!"

While basking in the excited shouts and cheers, Stella left the ring.

It has been about a month since The Seven Star Sword-Art Festival selection battles started, when the season turned.

Failure Knight, Kurogane Ikki.

Crimson Princess, Stella Vermillion.

Lorelei, Kurogane Shizuku.

With their consecutive wins, they became names that everyone in the school knew.

Part 2

"Congratulations, Onii-sama♥."

After Ikki came out of the exit of the fifth training arena where the match was held, he suddenly felt a light impact on his hips.

After looking down, he saw Shizuku with her jade-colored eyes giving off her presence there. And Arisuin was behind her.

"Thank you, Shizuku. But could you please stop hugging me in public places. It's embarrassing."

"Okay. It's cute when Onii-sama becomes embarrassed too."

"Alice, it seems like my words can't get through my sister anymore. As expected, do you think the lack of communication during those four years is the cause?"

"Fufu, that might be the origin."

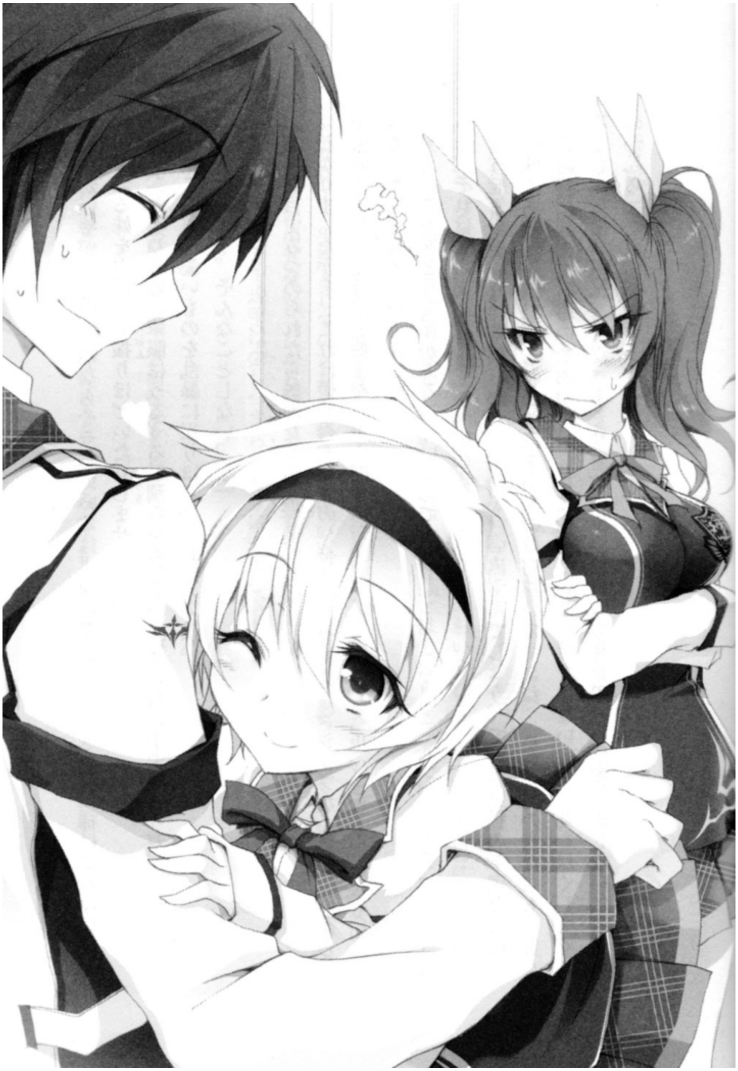
"Ahhh! Shizuku's hugging Ikki again!"

An angry roar sounded from behind Ikki who was being fawned over by Shizuku. The one standing there was Stella, who came out of the arena after Ikki. After seeing her, Shizuku's angelic expression twisted into something that made her look like she was biting on a sour insect.

"What is it, you loud person. You're already grown up so could you please not go around screaming like a kid."

"Isn't that because Shizuku is doing something strange to Ikki!?"

"Something strange? I don't understand. As you can see, am I not simply bonding? Right, Onii-sama? Aren't we simply siblings that get along?"



"Y-Yeah. But the distance is a bit too close and it's embarrassing. A little further would be better."

"See, Onii-sama said ‘Yeah'."

An outrageous quote mining just occurred!

"There was more after that! What is it with you and your double standards!"

"I don't know. I don't understand what you are saying. In the first place, just think about it, Stella-san. I am certainly clinging to Onii-sama, but I am not putting in much force. First of all, even if I did force it with all my power, Onii-sama would easily be able to tear away from me. That's right, if Onii-sama really did dislike it, he would have done that. But Onii-sama won't do something so mean to a sister who yearns so much for her brother, right?"

Right? Those jade-colored eyes of Shizuku's glimmered with moisture as she asked that, not unlike those of an abandoned puppy.

...There's no way he could shake off something so cute.

"Y-Yeah.... I wouldn't... do that."

IKKIII~!!!

"Do you get it? This is permitted skinship between siblings who love each other. Stella-san, who doesn't have anything to do with it, shouldn't butt in."

"I-I'm not unrelated!"

"Ooh? Then what kind of relation do you have?"

"T-That's......"

"In the end you are going to say something like you're his slave, right? But if you're his slave, then you questioning the actions of me, his sister, is in the wrong here. The people of your country, even though they do not serve you but your parents, they show proper respect to you, do they not? Or is it that the Vermillion imperial family only sees what's convenient for itself?"

"W-Wro, ugh, uuuu...."

Stella, who tried to rebut Shizuku's fierce attack only kept muttering. But what she tried to say, Ikki knew it. That's right. Their relation, it changed on that night one month ago. From simple roommates, it changed to being lovers. And Stella was a princess, even if hers was a small country. They didn't have the social standing to be able to announce such a thing in public. Of course, Ikki was also aware of that. That's why they decided to hide their relation for now.

But there was no woman in this world that would permit her lover to have a relationship that obviously passed the borders of love, even if it was her lover's sister. And of course, Stella didn't like it either. But she could not say it. That's why she sank into vexed silence.

And Shizuku glanced at that Stella looking a bit disappointed.

"Coward."

"Eh? Shizuku?"

"It's nothing. Then, shall we go, Onii-sama?"

"Uh—"

Stella sent a glance filled with jealousy towards Shizuku, who was now dragging Ikki away.

"UUU—!"

Seems like she was crying a little. It was a bit cute.

"Grrrr!"

She's growling!?

"H-Hey Shizuku. As I thought, locking arms with my sister at this age and in school as well, it's a bit… too embarrassing."

Sensing the incoming danger, he tried to shake Shizuku off.

Shizuku looked a bit dissatisfied, but she removed her arm immediately.

"I understand, Onii-sama… I wouldn't want to be hated by Onii-sama after all."

"There's no way I could hate you."

He denied that part. He could never hate his little sister who loved him so much. And that will not change, no matter what would happen.

At his words, Shizuku smiled a little.

"Thank you. But still, Onii-sama—"

She stopped speaking once and then whispered in a voice that couldn't be heard by anyone other than Ikki.

"If you are too kind, then you won't be able to go forward even if you try."

It seems like this good younger sister of his already guessed something.

…Won't go forward even if I try, is it….

Certainly, it was exactly as she said. Ikki has been Stella's lover for about a month. But their relationship hasn't progressed even a bit. Rather, it feels like it retreated a few steps. With him being her boyfriend, he felt overly conscious of her.

He wanted to be closer. He wanted to touch her more. His wanted to step on the next level. However, he didn't know when he should make his move. How exactly should he explain this situation? Should they both discuss this situation properly like a company meeting? Or should he make his move while having a random conversation?

I don't get it.

Ikki who had no experience with the opposite sex wasn't able to read the timings at all.

—And the more hopeless fact was that Stella was the same in that field. It's like they were sailing the deep blue seas without a compass. Of course, it would turn into a disaster.

…Like Shizuku said, should the guy be more aggressive in these cases?

But if that made Stella hate him… no can do. He couldn't be forceful. As a result, Ikki wasn't able to touch Stella even once in the last month.

…Haa…I'd like to get a kiss soon though.…

The fact that they felt more distant than before they started dating was a bit too lonely.

Part 3

"Ah! Hey look at that."

"It's the Crimson Princess. The Lorelei and the Failure Knight are also with her."

"They really have a different air to them, don't they? Those three."

"What are you spouting like you actually know something? Those two girls aside, that Failure Knight's just an F-Rank with a bit of luck, that's all."

"You, you're still saying stuff like that?"

"Rather, did you hear guys? I heard that Vermillion and the Kurogane brother both defeated those fourth and third ranked student council members easily."

"Seriously? Then there's only the 'Scharlach Frau' and the president left above them!"

"Well, those two are doing excellently in Hagun Academy, and if their luck doesn't turn downhill from now on their place in the representatives is almost certain. And the Kurogane sister also has consecutive wins."

"This year's first years are really something, huh. That tall dude behind the Witch of the Deep Sea. Isn't he also amazing?"

"Hey you, don't call him ‘that dude'! Nagi-sama has a cool nickname, 'Black Sonia'!"

"That's right! I can't believe you just called our Nagi-sama ‘that dude'!"

"H-Huh.... Sorry... I guess."

"That many talents gathered together in the first year alone.... This year, Hagun might actually do it."

As Ikki's group headed towards the main school building from the fifth arena, they felt various kinds of gazes on them. It had already been a month since the selection battles started. The number of remaining candidates was slimming down. And among the rest, the four who reigned undefeated would obviously gather attention.

Especially Ikki, he was attracting a lot of scrutiny. The Failure Knight who was advancing by leaps and bounds after defeating the Hunter shocked the student body of Hagun Academy beyond measure. Knights who boasted about their talents were defeated one after another by the person who was ranked F no matter how you evaluated his ability. At first, the students could not accept the scenes they saw as reality, but after the same thing happened nine times, they had no choice but to accept it. Ikki was no longer a fraud like they called him before. They could no longer see him like that.

It was enough to raise a sense of inferiority in a few others. Now, almost all of the knights could only be perplexed at this heretical failure of a knight, and only guess just how much higher he could climb.

Seeing that, Stella started to brag happily.

"Fu-fun. Seems like the other idiots finally noticed Ikki's strength."

"Of course. My Onii-sama is the most fantastic person in the world, to the point where those realizing it now can be considered way too slow. But still, things have really changed in the past month. There are a lot of people coming to the lunch break lecture nowadays."

"Certainly. I was so surprised when the third year sempais also came."

The lecture they were talking about was the one Ikki was forced to start giving, being pestered by his classmates. It was a martial arts class. Ikki gave classes on various martial arts. Of course swordsmanship was included, but there were also kodachi techniques, spear work, and even archery.

Only Ikki could do it. Being well versed in many martial arts after analyzing so many techniques of different enemies, he was a universal martial artist.

Though, taking into account that Ikki himself doesn't count anything else but swordsmanship as his speciality, and that he wouldn't teach the students actual techniques along with their skills, it was simply a school class for fundamental martial arts.

At first, it was only a few of Ikki's classmates who participated. But after all the uproar Ikki made, the students started to get a better opinion of martial arts. Now, not only the classmates, but people from outside the school boundaries also came to him for lessons. This was also one of the great changes that happened from a month ago.

"But the biggest change that happened till now… I guess it's that."

It had only been about a week since one particular change started. Honestly, he thought that if he ignored it, the problem would settle, but there were no signs of it ending any soon. He couldn't ignore it any longer.

"Onii-sama, what do you mean by… 'that'?"

"Yeah. Actually… I think I'm being stalked."

""HUH!?!?""

At Ikki's confession, both Stella and Shizuku yelled out simultaneously in surprise.

"S-S-Stalker! Y-You mean that right!? They follow you around, and they break into your rooms, and they shave their mustache and mail it to you! That kind of stalker! Right!?"

"Stella-san, you're talking about a razor blade. What in the world would they do by sending their beard in letters?"

"Is this stalker being careful with personal appearances? Seems to be quite the kind stalker."

"Shuuuuut up! Don't sweat the small stuff! Rather, now's not the time to talk about that!"

"That's right, Onii-sama. Could you please explain."

"I first felt the gaze about a week back. Since then, it's been following me around constantly. Alice already noticed that, right?"

"Yeah. But since Ikki hadn't brought it up, I thought it was okay not to talk about it."

"Well at first I thought it would settle itself if I simply ignored it but… it doesn't look like that at all, no signs of leaving."

"Do you remember doing anything that would make anyone hold something against you?"

"Nope. I don't."

Asked by Arisuin, he searched his memories but couldn't find anything.

And the gaze, he really didn't think it contained malice. More on the line of regret would be appropriate.

"…Then maybe, it's love. With Ikki, that is?"

"Ah, that could be possible!? That! I've heard that the resentment of stalkers are usually born from a feeling of love."

"Onii-sama is a knight who stands out a lot. And I've heard he's especially popular with girls. When gazing from afar, if a girl's eye meets with Onii-sama's, she might think that he was interested in her. Or when talking to him as a fan, she might misunderstand after exchanging words. These are all quite possible."

"Ikki seems extremely clumsy when it concerns behaving with woman."

"That's right. When asked for a handshake, he replies with a ‘Yeah, uh'. More like he gives a submissive kind of feeling."

Being looked at by Stella who seems to be finding a lot of fault with him, Ikki smiled bitterly. As the three said, Ikki with his features and kind demeanor was quite popular with women. And recently, there were a lot of them coming to cheer for him before his matches. But as for Ikki, he didn't know how to handle them. He couldn't be so cold as Shizuku, who ruthlessly ignored her gathering of fans, nor could he give proper fan service and sternly draw a line between them like Arisuin. He couldn't ignore all those who were supporting him. When talked to, he stopped and kept them company, when asked for a handshake, he ended up talking. There were also a few times when he was almost late for lessons because he was busy with the girls.

And it wouldn't be strange if one of those girls misunderstood Ikki's actions. Stella and company frowned at that possibility… but Ikki didn't think it was like that either, because from the gaze on his back, he didn't feel any malice but neither did he feel something like affection.

If he had to say, it felt more like being photographed with a camera.

"If it was something like being idolized then I wouldn't mind, but for someone to try to undeservedly lay her hands on my Onii-sama, well we can't have that can we. It's torture time."

"What are you going to do with that feather duster, Shizuku?"

"Isn't that obvious? I'll catch the stalker and have her go thorough tickle punishment."

"…It doesn't suit you, that cute way of punishing someone."

"…Well, the thing being tickled will be the eyeballs though."

"""THAT'S REALLY SCARY!"""

"…Well, since all this anticipation is built up and I don't know what's the answer to this situation but, well… let's directly ask the culprit shall we?"

Saying that, Ikki turned around towards the stone path they just passed through.

"Ikki, could it be that even now…?"

"Yeah. Ever since we finished jogging this morning."

The gaze that has been on even for a week, as if observing him. That gaze was coming from a thick bush on the other side of the paving. After lightly sighing once, Ikki called out.

"Hey, the person who's hiding there. Seems like you've been following me for a while now but, do you need something?"

He loudly called out to the stalker who was currently hiding in the bush. As so—

"Hyawaa! Ou—"

Pyon

As if flipping, the stalker hiding in the bush came out.

Even though there was no malice, following someone around for a week was definitely not normal. After all this, Ikki prepared himself to see what kind of snake would come of the bush but… to his great surprise; it was a black haired Yamato Nadeshiko[3]. In both hands, she held some tree branches.

"Ah, auau, wr-wrong! It's not what you think! I-I am, uuuh, uwah~!"

She probably realized that she had been found out. The female student was confused after she was suddenly seen through like this. Soon enough, she turned around and ran away. But behind the bush, there was a small pond.

"Kyaaaaaah!!! Gyabu!"

Splash

While she was hastily trying to get away, she tripped and fell head first. And a strange sound that seemed physiologically traumatic rang out.

"…."

The girl floated on the pond face-down without saying a word. And then… she didn't move anymore.

"Wha-, Y-You, are you okay… hell, you're definitely not okay! Alice, help me carry her!"

"Oh my, how awful."

While Ikki and Arisuin rushed to help—

"Such a beautiful person… is Ikki's stalker."

"It seems like the time I finally get to use this feather duster has come."

The intuitions of these two girls were ringing restlessly after this meeting.

Part 4

It was a small, gloomy private room. The only source of light was the small desk lamp on the table. And in the room, there was a girl sitting on the chair, and four robust men surrounding her.

All of the men had grim expressions and they questioned the girl while shouting.

"Give a straight answer! You were stalking the victim, Kurogane Ikki! Isn't that right!?"

"You were caught red-handed! You aren't gonna spout crap like you didn't do it, are ya!?"

The pressing questioning voices and the desk lamp's light which seemed way too dim. While prevailing over all of these, the girl frantically answered.

"N-No! That wasn't really stalking….!"

"Enough with the excuses!"

"Hii—"

"It's obvious that you've been tailing him for a week!"

"And after all that, you're still trying to make things up!?"

"Yeah! It's time for torture! Torture I tell you!"

"S-Stop iiiit~!!!"

"Ha-!?"

And finally, the girl snapped out of her nightmare. A white ceiling covered her field of vision. From the smell of medicine, she realized that this was the infirmary. It seems like she was sleeping on the sick bed here.

At that fact, the girl relaxed.

‘Thank goodness, that was a dream—‘

"Wax punishment, whipping, tear off, bondage, stone-weighted kneeling…."

As she turned her head, she saw an silver-haired girl whispering suggestions near her ear.

"Stake and burn, drowning death, nailed down, made to walk around town naked, triangular shaped wooden horse… ah, are you awake?"

"That stuff you've been whispering near my ears… that…."

"I wonder. Maybe you just saw a bad dream. Onii-sama, she has woken up."

The silver-haired girl, Shizuku, called towards the other side of the privacy curtain. After hearing that voice, Ikki, Stella and Arisuin entered.

"Oh my. You're already up. I was worried. That was quite the bump. As expected of Shizuku's healing magic."

"Since it wasn't an injury caused in a match, we couldn't use the capsule, but thank godness Shizuku was there. So, does it still hurt?"

After looking left and right, the girl completely grasped the situation. She fell head first in the pond and bumped her head, and those fellows carried her all the way to the infirmary and treated her.

"N-No, that's… I'm okay. Thanks… for taking care of me."

As she slowly got up from the bed, she bowed and showed her gratitude to Ikki and the others.

She really was a kind stalker. But why was it that she wasn't meeting anyone's eyes, and kept averting them?

"Well, I was very surprised about that injury. It's a good thing that it wasn't serious. But… why do you keep averting your eyes?"

"P-Please don't mind it. T-There's a really personal reason for this."

She sounded pretty nervous while answering. And now even the state of her body was obviously tensed, and she just couldn't calm down. Maybe, she really was tailing Ikki because of some resentful reason and now she wouldn't look him in the eyes. Well, it was probably about time he asked that. First—

"If you're okay now, then I'd like to ask about a few things…. First of all could you tell us your name?"

"I-I'm Ayatsuji Ayase. A senior."

An upperclassman? That's a bit unexpected.

Maybe because she made that blunder when they first met. Or maybe because she simply couldn't calm herself down. He couldn't imagine her as someone older. But since she was older, he couldn't afford to back down or speak so unreservedly now. He changed to using honorifics, and asked the thing that bugged him the most.

"Then Ayatsuji-sempai, I'll repeat what I asked before: why was Sempai following me aro-… err… Sempai?"

"W-What?"

"You're not just looking the other way, but your head is completely turned in the opposite direction… honestly, what's the matter?"

Before he even noticed, Ayase had turned towards the wall on the opposite side. Her neck was turned to its limit, he could tell by seeing the nape of her neck.

"D-Don't mind it. I-It's nothing."

"No, of course I'll mind it!? This is the first time in my life that someone I'm talking to is trying so hard not to meet my gaze!? What is it? Is there something on that wall over there?"

"I-I mean…. I-It's… embarrassing."

She said, with a voice so low that it could be mistaken for the buzzing of a mosquito.

"…Huh?"

"T-Talking with a boy I don't know, w-while looking eye to eye… that's too embarrassing."

Looking carefully, Ayase's face was completely dyed red to her ears, as if she was on fire.

"W-Why is Kurogane-kun able to talk face-to-face so easily with a girl he just met?"

"Eh… why? Even if you ask that, I think it's normal to look at the face of the person I'm talking to in a conversation."

"N-Normal…. I-Is that so…. Amazing…. That's impossible for me. Even though I know it's rude, I can't face straight when I am being looked at so fixedly…."

Ikki never thought that he would ever be complimented because of something like that.

Certainly, Ayase looked his way as if peeping several times, but as soon as she met Ikki's gaze, her eyes immediately escaped. Seemed like she herself was trying to look this way, but since she was so embarrassed, it didn't seem like she would be successful.

And that didn't seem like acting. It seemed like Ayase was a very shy sempai.

…This is troubling. If possible, I'd liked to talk face to face but….

If not, it'd be difficult to see through it if she lied. Ikki pondered on what to do.

"Well, if it's us girls then would that be all right?"

Suddenly, Stella and Shizuku stood imposingly before Ayase and spoke to her with a criticizing tone.

"I'll have you confess. Why was Sempai tailing Ikki? What's your objective?"

"T-That… That is…."

"Isn't it obvious why a girl would stalk a boy, or a boy would stalk a girl. She was obviously peeping at him with eyes filled with carnal desires."

"IS THAT TRUE!?"

"T-That's wrong! Honest!"

As expected, it seems like the reason Ayase was tailing Ikki was neither malice nor affection. Then, why in the world would she tail a repeating student like….

….Hmm?

At that moment, Ikki noticed something on the palms of Ayase's hand, who was waving them rapidly while denying Stella and Shizuku. Calluses, a result of swinging a shinai several thousand, hundreds of thousands of time. Seeing that, Ikki immediately thought of a possibility.

…Those calluses, and the surname Ayatsuji… no way!

"Sempai. Could it be that Sempai is a relative of Ayatsuji Kaito-san?"

Being asked that, Ayase immediately widened her eyes open and turned towards Ikki.

"C-Certainly, Ayatsuji Kaito is my father… b-but, how could you tell?"

"The calluses on Sempai's palms. That's the hand of a swordsman. And besides, for you to be able to keep up with me and Stella's jogging, that wouldn't be possible unless you have a substantially trained body. And Sempai's surname was Ayatsuji… so just maybe, I thought. But who would've thought you really were his daughter, and that you study in the same school. That was quite the surprise."

Stella tilted her head, seeing the excited Ikki and wondered about what could be so exciting about that. And she asked Arisuin—

"Hey, who's Ayatsuji Kaito?"

"Who knows? I'm not familiar with that name."

"A non-Blazer who is also called 'the Last Samurai'."

Instead of Arisuin, Shizuku was the one who answered.

"Since most Blazers aren't interested in martial arts that much, it isn't a surprise that Alice doesn't know. But for people who've studied the sword even a little, there isn't even a single person who doesn't know of the name 'Ayatsuji Kaito'. He is that much of a master."

Heavenly Dragon's Contest— Tournament of the East and West— Musashi Cup— Tenth Dan Match—

He was a genius swordsman who participated and won in all the world-famous sword competitions. There was also a record of him suppressing several Blazer criminals in his prime, despite not being a Blazer himself.

"Normally, even a pistol wouldn't do much against a Blazer who is protected by magic. But before his sword, that handicap was nothing. He was probably the person who grieved over not being born a Blazer the most… but since he was so strong while not even being a Blazer, he seemed to have bought the resentment of the mage-knights, so his fame didn't reach so far into the world of knights."

"But Shizuku knows him."

"Because unlike most mage-knights, the Kurogane house knows the merits of martial arts."

Because she grew sick of the Kurogane house which chased away her beloved brother, she didn't follow through the path of the martial arts the Kurogane house took. But she still remembered about the Last Samurai. And there was no way that Ikki, who followed the path of the sword much more earnestly, didn't know the name of the great pioneer.

"When I was a kid, I watched the videos of Kaito-san's matches and decided to study swordsmanship. During middle school, I even went to the dojo to challenge him directly."

"Eh? Is that so…."

"However, I was refused you know. They said they didn't do unsanctioned matches like that. But I'm really happy, to be able to meet Kaito-san's daughter like this. Kaito-san, how is he doing? Is he well? I haven't been hearing about him lately, so I was wondering what had happened."

Ikki asked with an excited voice. But at that question, Ayase's expression clouded.

"…Actually, because of an injury during a match… he's currently hospitalized."

"Eh…. …I-I'm sorry. I asked something rude."

"N-No, you don't have to apologize. You didn't do anything wrong. For someone amazing like Kurogane-kun to hold my father in such high regard, it makes me very happy. A-And this talk isn't unrelated to why I was following you around."

"What do you mean by that?"

"…After my father, who was also my mentor, became hospitalized, I've been training in the Ayatsuji single-blade style, but recently I seem to have fallen into a slump…."

She anguished over how to follow in the steps of her father, her mentor.

"But then, I heard rumors about Kurogane-kun, a first-year who used a strange sword technique. So I thought, if I consulted Kurogane-kun… I might figure something out but—"

At that point, Ayase's voice thinned out, and she averted her eyes from Ikki.

"But, other than my father and the students in the dojo, I haven't talked to any boys since I was a kid…. That… I was wondering how to approach you and…."

"Were you… were you following me around the whole week while thinking of how to talk to me?"

"As embarrassing as it may be…."

…*Uwah, what a reserved person.*

Almost like a rolled bun left on the table that grew moldy without anyone noticing. Other than Ikki, the three people behind them were speechless at her reason for stalking.

At that time, Ayase once again bowed to Ikki.

"…I-I'm really really sorry! I've been stalking you for so long. It can't be helped if you think of me as an unpleasant woman. B-But I swear not to approach you again…. S-So please don't call the police."

"No, it's not like I'm thinking about handing you to the police."

Rather, he felt quite attracted towards the strange swordswoman he met today. And moreover, she was the daughter of the Last Samurai. Just what kind of techniques did she use? He was extremely curious.

"Erm, Ayatsuji-sempai. If it's okay with you, would you please train with me after this?"

"—Eh?"

"We're both sword practitioners. Maybe we could counsel each other. And besides, I want to experience the sword of the Last Samurai first hand. Just seeing it has its limits."

"Is that really alright!?"

Ayase immediately jumped off the bed and grasped Ikki's hand with both of hers, and smiled like a blooming flower.

"Thank you very much!! I'm really happy!"

The confused pure eyes she had a moment ago now looked straight at Ikki. But she soon realized what she was doing, and immediately she separated and backed away about three meters.

"Ah, S-Sorry! F-For me to grab your hand like that, such rudeness…!"

"Ahaha, you don't have to be startled just because you grabbed my hand—"

After all, there were younger sisters out there who'd kiss their brother at their reunion, and princesses who would trespass into the bath wearing a bikini—

"Then shall we train together from now? The matches today are already over, so we have time until dinner."

"Yeah, I'll be in your care… and could you talk to me casually? Since I'll be the one learning, it will feel weird for the teacher to be the one using honorifics."

"That's, I'm not so amazing to be called a teacher you know."

"That's not true. A while ago Kurogane-kun said we could counsel each other, but honestly, I don't think there is a single thing I can teach Kurogane-kun. Thus the disciple here is actually me."

Ikki showed a bitter smile at that. It was as she said, even though Ikki could teach her stuff, there was nothing she could teach him in return. He could steal most of her techniques just by seeing them. More humility would just be sarcastic.

Confirming that, Ikki accepted Ayase's suggestion.

"…Okay, then I'll drop the honorifics. But in return, talk to me normally too. Calling me your teacher, that would put me in a tough situation."

"Yeah, please, I'll be in your care."

And thus, the stalker Ayatsuji Ayase became Ikki's disciple.

Part 5

After school, Ikki went to the opening in the woods behind the campus in order to train. The place was shaded with tall trees grouped together, and there was less concrete so it was quite refreshing. It was the perfect place to train during the humid summer of Japan.

After performing the initial warm-up, he branded *Intetsu* and started swinging it. After tracing the form, he began image training, creating a shadow map in his head where enemies are around. Besides him, there was also Stella who was practicing with her *Lævateinn*. A little further away was Arisuin and Shizuku who were using a kind of unique clay to create shapes, a special form of magic training. During that time, there was almost no conversation between the four. Stella and Shizuku, who usually fawned over Ikki, were also very serious during this period. This was the scene where these four trained.

But since 3 days ago, another person had joined in. Of course, that person was none other than Ayatsuji Ayase.

"Fuh! Hah!"

Ayase vigorously swang her sword *Hizume*[4], a Japanese katana with a vivid blade, drawing an arc with it. Her face when she used the sword was completely different from the cowering expression she had in the infirmary the other day. With her mouth closed and eyes wide open, she looked only at Ikki with an extremely stern expression. As expected of a swordswoman, the moment she held her sword, all her fear towards men completely disappeared.

Right now, they were doing equal mock training with Ikki as her opponent, per his suggestion. Ikki would fight Ayase while limiting his power to her level, since he was the stronger one. He would only use techniques of her strength level.

And during this training, he would measure Ayase's strength as a swords practitioner.

As expected of the Last Samurai Ayatsuji Kaito's daughter, Ayase was very adept at the basics. She could even keep up with Ikki and Stella's jogging. She must have run for a long time. Ayase's body was perfected as a swordsman, so with any kind of form, shape, posture and body, there was no uneasiness in her muscles.

The training from the day before was also paying off. Her footwork, the vivid red that drew the arc, everything flowed perfectly together with no interruptions at all. It must have been a form engraved into her body after practicing it thousands of times.

But if one said that she couldn't handle anything but that form, then that was also wrong. During this practice, Ikki tried some seriously underhanded methods over and over again to try and break Ayase's form, but not only did Ayase deal with those attacks appropriately, she also did rapid counter-attacks.

Never forgetting the form, while not being too fixed on it. Ayase's level of skill in practical sword fights was unnaturally high. Ikki completely saw through the surface of Ayase, who boasted of hard work.

Through this, Ikki figured out why Ayase was in a slump.

"Ayase-san, let's stop for a minute."

"Nn?"

Ayase parried Ikki's downward slashing sword and with that opening, she went to strike for his body. But the red blade of *Hizume* was tightly halted.

"What's the matter, Kurogane-kun? I'm still… I'm not… tired yet."

Ayase showed confusion at the sudden interruption. Her eyes didn't calm down, but she didn't avert her eyes and disappear like the first time. Well, it was natural that she would get a bit used to Ikki after three days.

"As I can see, the Ayatsuji single-blade style seems to be a sword style that emphasizes on counter-attacks."

"Eh, err, yeah. That's right. You could tell with only that much?"

"I didn't have a master you see, so I've only learned stuff by observing and stealing techniques from others. So as I was saying, now that I've seen your style, I kinda figured out what your problem is."

"I-Is that true!?"

"Yeah. Ayatsuji-san's been in a slump after you've started trying to follow your father's ways, right?"

Ayase nodded.

"Yes. I just can't seem to produce the same sharp movements like my father. Even though I've memorized all of his moves already."

"You shouldn't do that."

"Eh!?"

"Trying to mimic Kaito-san, that's the reason for your slump."

"…Are you saying that… my father who taught me how to use the sword was… incorrect?"

Instantly, Ikki saw an emotion in Ayase's burning eyes. It was anger. She was angry after being told that her teacher was the one who was the cause of the mistake.

She really seems to trust Kaito-san.

He was a bit jealous after seeing that she had a father she was so proud of. While keeping that small envy hidden inside, Ikki shook his head in reply to Ayase's bitter words.

"That's not it. Kaito-san was an excellent swordsman. I don't doubt that."

"…Then, why can't I mimic father's techniques?"

The reason was simple.

"It's because Ayatsuji-san's gender is different."

"Gender…? Does that matter?"

"Of course. Being a different gender means your body structure is also different. And having a different structure naturally means the muscle coordination is also dissimilar. Movements that bring out the best of a man's potential form are definitely not the same as the movements for a woman's potential form. The more you try to follow the opposite, the sooner the restrictions caused by it would surface."

"Ah…."

At Ikki's careful explanation, the anger faded away from Ayase's eyes, and understanding replaced it. Ikki wasn't mocking her teacher. Rather, it was because her teacher excelled too much. Well, there were some unavoidable factors too. In the first place, swordsmanship was something created for men to use in ancient times.

"For the time being, I've thought of a method on how to reform Ayatsuji-san's movements. If Ayatsuji-san wants to continue her previous ways of following Kaito-san, then I won't forcefully reform them. Since I don't think that we should do it if you think like that either. Because one's mentality is a big factor too. However, if the movements are reformed through this technique, you won't be able to reclaim your previous movements afterwards."

Currently, Ayase was practicing a sword art that was tuned for men. So of course, her body recognized that it was impossible and it was constraining her power and speed in various ways. Following Ikki's method, she could smoothen her movements while discarding all the strain. But if a swordswoman with the skill level of Ayase experienced those smooth movements even once, she wouldn't be able to revert back to her previous state. It would follow that she would have some regrets when that happened.

That was why Ikki gave Ayase the choice whether or not to follow his guidance.

"...."

Ayase spent a considerable amount of time thinking it through. For a while, she was in a conflict. But it wasn't long until she made a resolute expression.

"Please teach me! I, I have to become stronger no matter what!"

She looked at Ikki's eyes without flinching, and requested for his cooperation. Of course, she was still conflicted, but she wished for strength nonetheless.

That's why Ikki had no reason to decline.

"I understand. Leave it to me."

Ikki gave a trustworthy smile, and touched Ayase's arms.

"Fuwahaa~! K-Kurogane-kun!?"

Suddenly being touched so tightly, Ayase's face went red and she let out a strange moan.

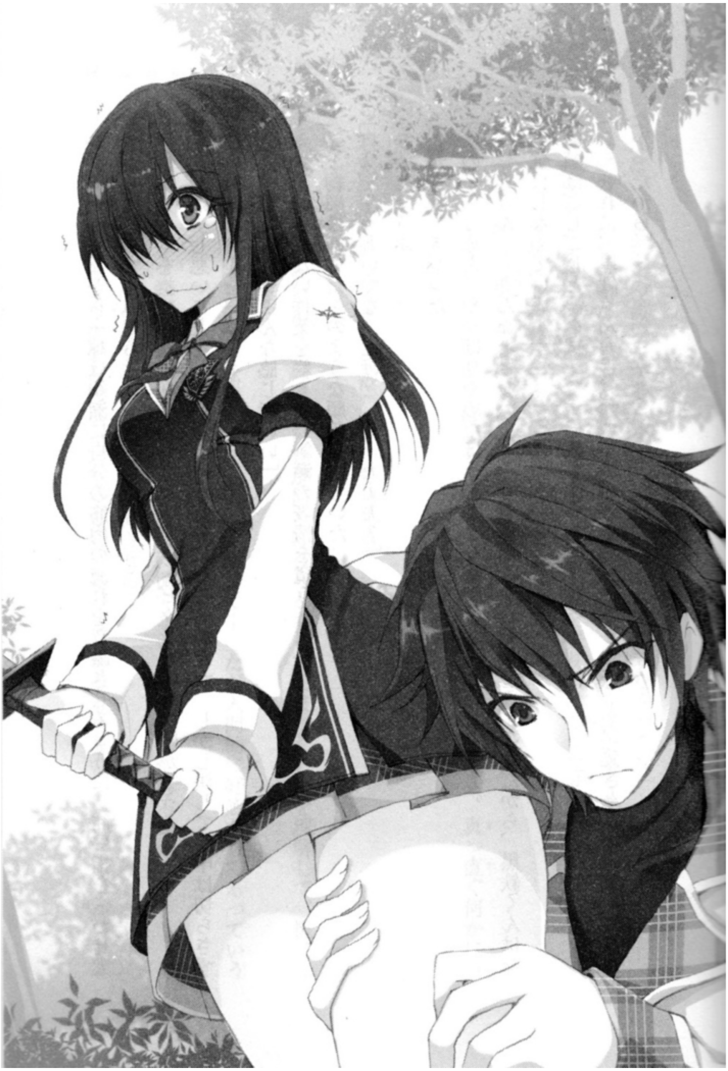
As for Ikki, he had a completely stern expression. That was obvious, because from now, he was going to adjust Ayase's sword style. If he messed up after having wicked thoughts or feeling awkward, then that mistake couldn't be reversed. The teacher couldn't be forgiven for mistakes. That's what Ikki thought. Ikki didn't have the luxury of feeling reserved.

"From now I am going to change Ayatsuji-san's form to the correct one. It might be embarrassing, but bear with it."

"Y-Yeah... I'll... try my best."

Even though her face was steaming red, she endured it and bit her lip.

Ikki, who didn't even drop a sweat while sparring with Ayase, was now sweating from his forehead. He was touching all over her body while having an expression so serious that it was scary. Seeing that, Ayase understood just how much Ikki was trying for her sake.



There's no way she wouldn't understand. So she couldn't be so selfish as to be feeling embarrassed. That why Ayase killed off her shyness, and entrusted her body to Ikki.

"I'll only adjust a little, so feel that change and concentrate to remember that location."

"R-Roger~ Nn~"

Ikki moved his hands as if he were touching glassware, and carefully adjusted Ayase's posture. Lowering the shoulders a little bit, he fastened her side. Next, he touched the healthy looking thighs coming out of her skirt. Finally touching the inner thighs, he opened up her posture a bit.

"Fu… ah, hyan~ uuu….~"

"The thing women benefit more from than men is the flexibility of their joints. Specially the hip joints. When they become pregnant, their pelvis widens. So their hip joints have to be that flexible. In other words, they have higher mobility in that area than men. This is the weapon of a woman. If Ayatsuji-san makes all your movements with the joints of your hip, then your actions will definitely speed up."

While lecturing her, Ikki stroked his fingers from her thighs to her knees as if he could read the flow of her muscles. From the shame of having her hips stroked by a man, Ayase's knees trembled. Ikki had the feeling he was doing something very rude to her, but without minding that and keeping his concentration fixed, he continued the work of minute details and finally….

"Yeah. This should do it."

After completing the job wherein a miss wouldn't be forgiven, he looked at Ayase.

…Ayase had an expression that made him think of an octopus.

"I was the one who did it but… are you alright?"

"I'mbokkay…"

And she was half crying.

"Err… sorry. I should've stopped."

"N-Nooo! That's not true! In the first place I was the one who asked, Kurogane-kun shouldn't feel sorry!"

After wiping of her tears, Ayase smiled.

"…And besides, Kurogane-kun's hands, they were so big, and gentle, and strong…. Like father's, so I didn't hate it."

"Haha, who could've thought that these dirty hands would be helpful like this."

Ever since he was young, Ikki had been studying swordsmanship. So the skin of his hands were quite rough. Maybe because no matter how much the skin peeled, or calluses formed, he kept swinging his sword without rest. But even with that comment, his hands definitely couldn't be called beautiful. So he shook his head in denial.

"That's not true… I, that kind of hand, I think it's very cool. I love boys who drive straight forward."

"Eh?"

Ikki became speechless at those unexpected words.

"Ah…."

And after seeing Ikki's response, Ayase realized what she had just said and panicked.

"That, now! I didn't mean it in an indecent way! Only as a personality! That's it!"

"Y-Yeah! I get it. Don't panic so much or the posture will break!"

Ikki fixed the posture of the distressed Ayase. If it fell apart after all that work, that would be too unfortunate.

"Nn… but Kurogane-kun… this feels a bit tight."

"That's because the habits you've built in your body cannot be reformed right away. You have to practice and get used to it."

Saying that, Ikki took out *Intetsu* and stood before Ayase.

"From now onward, I'll slash at you with my sword just like before. I've changed the angle in your knees, elbows, and hip joints. Move based on these three points and try to parry my strike just like before and counter attack."

"R-Roger."

Ayase, who took out *Hizume*, had looked tense. Guessing that she was ready, Ikki brought down his sword with the exact same speed and angle as before.

Then....

"...!"

Just like before, Ayase parried the strike diagonally, and with the opening, she countered. However, whether the actions really were the same... it could be confirmed just by seeing that the strike was definitely faster.

At that fact, more than anyone else, Ayase herself was at a loss for words. As if she couldn't believe her own movements, she looked at the *Hizume* she grasped in her hands with terror, and then at Ikki.

Whew. Seems like it was a success.

Ikki was relieved that his corrections were right on spot.

Until now, Ayase had used her upper body-she put strength in her arms to block the strikes.

But that was an error. If it was a male, then he could follow up smoothly after that action, but with a female's physique, putting strength in her arms would not be enough, and after that it would just break her stance. As a result, the body would only stiffen, and the reaction would also be slower.

But after Ikki's corrections, she now received the attack by relying on her lower body. A female's tender thigh joints were suitable to absorb the shock. She could block most of the attacks just by putting strength on her legs. And since there wouldn't be strain on her body, she could react to the next attack timely.

That was the mechanism that resulted in a sharp adjustment to Ayase's fighting.

"A-awesome… awesome awesome! This is awesome Kurogane-kun!!"

Perhaps she had finally grasped the changes to her body. She made a bright smile and grabbed Ikki's hands firmly while waving them around like crazy.

"To be able to solve the problem I've been troubled with for two years so easily! Kurogane-kun's almost like that right!? A PhD in swordsmanship, right!"

"I'm also relieved to find out that I'm not mistaken."

Not too happy about such a shady degree though.

Other than Shizuku, for people who come to the lecture during the lunch break, he could not guide them so directly like this. For Ikki, this was the first time he had taught someone directly. But, after seeing Ayase who was skipping in total delight while her body screamed ‘I did it! I did it!' with all her might, despite being tense he was glad he did it.

Foom

Honestly, he was more tense than when he was in a match. It was also around ten times wearier, but it paid off.

Foom

Maybe this kind of job wasn't so bad after all.

FoomFoomFoom

"...Erm, Stella."

"What is it, Dr. Swordsmanship?"

"For a while, an amazing amount of wind pressure has been blasting this way, but..."

Ikki turned sideways and looked at the origin of the wind pressure that was hitting his face for a while. There, he saw a Stella swinging around *Lævateinn* with a pouting face so grand that it was amazing.

"Oh, sorry about that. After seeing a pervert who was brushing a girl's thighs in the name of training, I got a bit too irritated. Thanks to that, seems like my swordsmanship is all messed up. Since it's come to this, would you be kind enough to fix that for me now?"

"O, O-Okay."

Ikki was overwhelmed by Stella's force which wouldn't allow him to refuse, so he nodded.

....But I really don't want to mess with Stella's sword.

After all, Stella's sword was 'a sword of the strong' meant for mowing down her enemies. Compared to Ikki's 'sword of the weak' which was for outsmarting the enemy, it was fundamentally different. He didn't feel like there would be any results even if he tried to help. But if he didn't comply here, her irritation would only grow and grow, causing a period of incessant pouting.

Without any choice, but without extracting his hands, he observed Stella's swings.

...Huh?

At first glance it might look like her swings were totally messed up, but looking carefully he could see that from her toes, to her knees and hips, her movements were completely synchronized. There weren't any useless actions at all. Stella had probably intended to mess up those swings, but because of her superhuman perception of motion, she subconsciously corrected the movements of her joints and muscles and created the most suitable form where the least energy is wasted. This was truly strength deserving of pride.

To be able to find faults with such perfect swordsmanship, was impossible for Ikki.

"As expected of Stella. Someone like me can't possibly find a fault in you."

"WHY!!!"

"Uwah! Why're you getting mad even though I praised you!?"

"IT'S NOTHING, YOU IDIOT!!!"

Ikki's demon-like perception for swords and swordsmanship were of no use in examining the heart of a maiden.

Well, that could not be helped. His brain was filled with only pure thoughts for battles.

Part 6

"What's with him!! Only looking at that sempai!"

After going crazy and chasing Ikki around for a while, Stella sat down on the bench in front of the lounge beside the plaza. Shizuku, who was conducting magic training on the next bench, looked at Stella, who was obviously fuming.

"Maybe he didn't want to touch the princess's faaaaaaaaaaaaaaat thighs."

"I-It's not so fat that you had to drag it out that much! It's only a bit chubby! And it's not like I can help it, it was trained that way!!"

Stella protested that sudden and totally unexpected evaluation with a high-pitched voice, but Shizuku averted her face with an 'I don't know anything' expression and made an action figure out of clay that looked just like Ikki.

"I mean, it totally looks like Ikki. Like Ikki. Cool! I want one!"

"Now now, you don't have to get so nervous. Unlike Ayatsuji-sempai, Stella-chan is on a completely different level. I don't think there is anything he could instruct you on."

"Mu—!"

Arisuin's follow up was spot on, and Stella's brain was also in agreement. In reality, Stella did not need Ikki's guidance at all.

—But that was that, and this is this.

…Maybe my heart is the narrower one.

If her arms and thighs were also squished and stroked by another man, would Ikki also feel the same way?

Wait! What the hell kind of rotten thing am I thinking! That's definitely wrong! T-That! Squishing and stroking! That's only for Ikki! I'll only allow Ikki to squish and stroke me!

It was disgusting just to think about it. Stella kicked out that delusion from her mind, and asked Shizuku.

"Hey… is Shizuku okay with this?"

"Okay? What do you mean?"

"I mean…. Ikki touching and stroking another woman all over the place."

"I was wondering what you'd ask. Onii-sama is teaching Ayatsuji-sempai swordsmanship. Unlike some other sow, she's not trying to seduce him, so is there a reason to snarl at her? I'm not a rabid dog you know."

While answering that, Shizuku started to paint the Ikki action figure with the acrylic paint she had brought out of her bag. This was already art so training had nothing to do with it.

"And which mouth was the one who snarled at me so much?"

"This mouth."

Shizuku pointed at her mouth with her two index fingers. Truly an irritable face.

"Stella-san, you seem to have misunderstood something."

"What are you talking about?"

"You seem to have thought that I want to monopolize Onii-sama, but that is a regrettable misunderstanding. My love for Onii-sama isn't something so cheap and selfish. To me, the thing that matters most is Onii-sama's happiness. If Onii-sama becomes happy, then I don't mind if his partner isn't me. If that person truly brings Onii-sama happiness without betraying him or making him feel sad, then

I'd be glad and bless them."

This confession was something completely unexpected to Stella, because she thought that Shizuku loved Ikki as a woman.

"Well, I don't think there is a person other than me who could do that anyway."

Saying that, Shizuku smiled at Stella provokingly, and then looked towards the square where Ikki and Ayase had again started to spar.

"Onii-sama seems so happy after Ayatsuji-sempai came. The other students and I aren't strong enough to learn solid sword techniques while Stella-san is too strong for Onii-sama to teach anything, so maybe he was feeling a bit unsatisfied. The Onii-sama who is having fun guiding others is also very cute and fabulous. So I guess I should actually be thankful to Ayatsuji-sempai."

"…Shizuku sometimes seems so mature. Even though you're so small."

"Maybe you're the one who's too much of a child, even though you're big in so many places. And your thighs are too fat."

"They're not fat! You're the one who's too tiny!"

It's enough if Ikki's happy.

Certainly, if Ikki was happy, then that was happiness for Stella too. But still, she can't help but think that she wanted to be the one to make Ikki the happiest.

…But in reality, it was not going too well. After they became lovers, she would become tense just by being near him. And they hadn't done anything lover-like at all. Specially the nights they spent together alone; those were severe. Just by meeting his gaze, her spine would go numb, and she would be unable to even see properly.

Was Ikki restraining himself too? He would never break their personal boundaries.

For Stella, she actually didn't hate that slow going time too much. Even though she'd feel kind of itchy and embarrassed, her heart would beat faster just by being near him. But she had that strong desire to take the next step as lovers.

She also heard that girls who make boys wait were soon hated. 「In the past month, we haven't done anything like lovers at all have we? Then wouldn't it be okay if we returned to our previous relationship?」

…No, definitely NO!

She would cry just by imagining such a thing. If that really happened, then she would never be able to bear it.

But, this kind of thing, should the girl be the one who makes the first move? What if she was thought to be indecent, or if she was hated? No matter how she thought, the wild delusions would come up again. She just couldn't figure it out.

And the worst thing was that even if Ikki made the first move, she wasn't confident that she would obediently comply. She understood her perverseness the best. She was sure, that she'd give excuses like how a princess should act, or what a princess shouldn't do.

"Haa…."

Even though it was so easy to fly at an opponent with her sword, why was it so hard to dive into her lover's chest? The couples around the world, her mother and father, why could they do it so easily? They have way too much courage.

While thinking something so hopeless, Stella looked up towards the sky which was dyed in a mad red and thought—

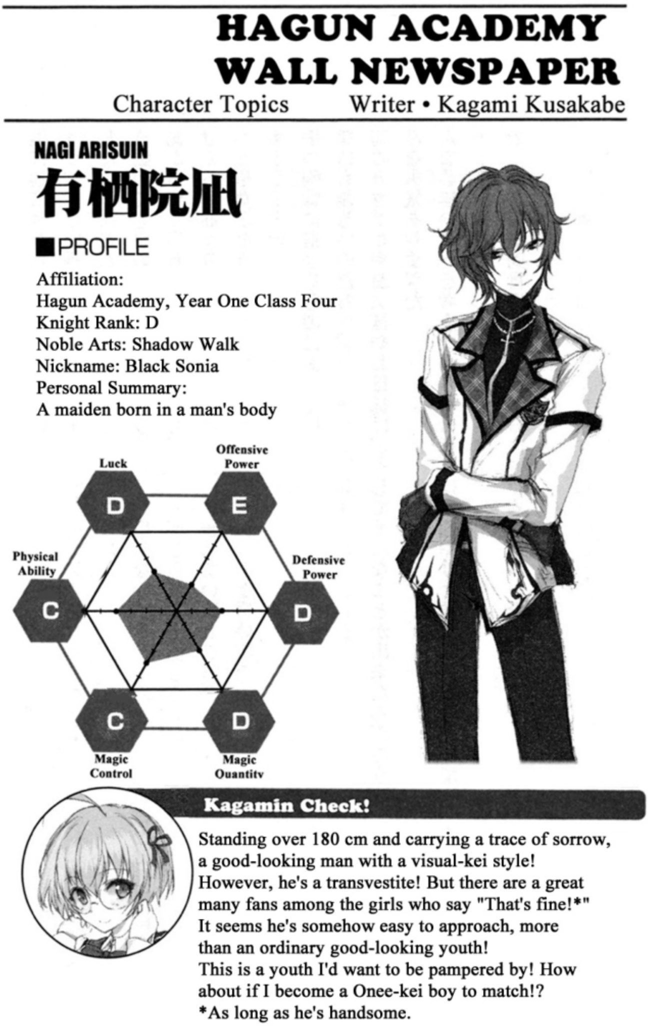
Haa… I really want to kiss him….

It was the millionth helpless sigh that she had let out in that one month alone.

References

1. ↑ *Lorelei*: A siren-like female creature from a German poem, whose beauty and song lead sailors to crash upon the cliff she sits on. The Japanese text uses the kanji 深海の魔女, "Witch of the Deep Sea".
2. ↑ Zanbatō (斬馬刀, literally meaning *"Horse Killing Sword"*) are fictional blades commonly used in anime and manga, known for being large.
3. ↑ *Yamato Nadeshiko*: A term for those whose appearance and behavior matches the idealized Japanese woman.
4. ↑ *Hizume*, 緋爪: "Scarlet Claw"

Chapter 2: Twilight of Disaster



HAGUN ACADEMY WALL NEWSPAPER

Character Topics Writer • Kagami Kusakabe

NAGI ARISUIN

有栖院凪

■PROFILE

Affiliation:
Hagun Academy, Year One Class Four
Knight Rank: D
Noble Arts: Shadow Walk
Nickname: Black Sonia
Personal Summary:
A maiden born in a man's body

Luck D
Offensive Power E
Defensive Power D
Magic Quantity D
Magic Control C
Physical Ability C

Kagamin Check!

Standing over 180 cm and carrying a trace of sorrow, a good-looking man with a visual-kei style! However, he's a transvestite! But there are a great many fans among the girls who say "That's fine!*" It seems he's somehow easy to approach, more than an ordinary good-looking youth! This is a youth I'd want to be pampered by! How about if I become a Onee-kei boy to match!?
*As long as he's handsome.

Part 1

"Let's go to the pool tomorrow."

After getting his tenth consecutive victory at the selection matches, Ikki had said that to Ayase. It wasn't like he had the intention of playing around. While Ayase might not have realized it, because of the training she was having with Ikki every day, her body was stressed all over, especially because of her posture. It was corrected just a few days ago and she was not used to it yet… In other words, she had to repeatedly use various muscles she hadn't used before.

That was why today was going to be a rest day. And in order to make the best of it, Ikki had prepared the perfect menu. He was going to the pool for that very reason.

Besides Ikki who was waiting for Ayase that morning, Stella, who wore a white one piece dress reminiscent of a frigid early summer, was also there.

"Of course I'd come. If I took my eyes off you, you might sexually harass Sempai again."

"But I didn't sexually harass her."

"Lies. On the contrary, you did it just the other day. Who'd normally go and touch a girl's inner thigh?"

"I only did that to correct Sempai's posture. It was a critical action which if I by any chance messed up… well, I absolutely didn't have any free time to think about anything frivolous."

Stella's mood had turned for the worse over these few days. Naturally, Ikki knew the reason for it. It was because he was only paying attention to Ayase these few days… That's probably what she thought. Well, it couldn't be helped. If Stella, Ikki's girlfriend, was going around flirting with other guys, naturally that wouldn't feel very good to him. That's why he understood how Stella felt. But still—

"Hey Stella, I haven't looked at Ayatsuji-sempai pervertedly even once, believe me. I'm only helping Sempai out a bit as a fellow swordsman. That's all there is… there isn't anyone who doesn't need the help of others from time to time."

Ikki hadn't even been helped once like this. The adults who should've helped him all ganged up on him like enemies. That's why, if he ever saw someone who was in need of help and couldn't solve their own troubles, he strongly desired to help them. He would help them climb the wall they couldn't climb alone because he knew how hard it was to climb it alone.

"That's the reason I am giving Ayatsuji-sempai a helping hand, and it's definitely not because of something like love. I swear! I mean… the one I love… is you, Stella."

"…Ikki…."

With her cheeks dyed red, Stella looked up at Ikki. There was a tint of unease dwelling in her scarlet-colored eyes, which was to be expected. Yes, Stella had already known that. Ikki didn't have any feelings towards Ayase that should make Stella worry. The man she loved wasn't as petty as that. But still… she couldn't help but feel insecure. It was because the only thing that tied that was a verbal promise. They hadn't done anything to show their love but that…

Stella's lips glossily moved as if desiring something. Those pink lips, it seems like she called his name. Ah! That's right, if he could right now prove that his words that night weren't just some random talk, she should have much more trust in him.

I…

Ikki drew near Stella's lips like a bee desiring honey from a flower.

"Sorry for the wait! I couldn't find my swimsuit so I had to search for it!"

""Uwaaaaaaaah!!!""

"What's wrong? You're screaming like a couple who had their love affair found out on the spot."

Uwah! Dead on!?

The both of them sweated like crazy in front of Ayase.

"I-I-It's nothing! Right, Ikki?"

"Yeah! We were just surprised because you called out so suddenly!"

"…?"

She tilted her head. She didn't look convinced. That's why Ikki dragged the two and left in a hurry in order to change the place.

That was dangerous. Because of Stella's position, their relationship would be an international scandal. He had to be more careful when he created that steamy mood next time.

…But that was indeed regrettable. Other than that one night, this was the only time such a mood was created naturally. If Ayase was just a bit later, they could have progressed to the next step. Ikki realized that he had just missed an extremely rare chance, and sighed inwardly.

Part 2

Within the gigantic campus of Hagun Academy, there would naturally be swimming pools. More specifically, two 100-meter pools in length. But that day, the first pool was undergoing routine cleaning and the second was being used by Shinguuji Kurono, the former third rank in the King of Knights world and the new director of Hagun Academy, for special training. That was why the three went to the sports gym situated near the academy. They were going to use the indoor pool.

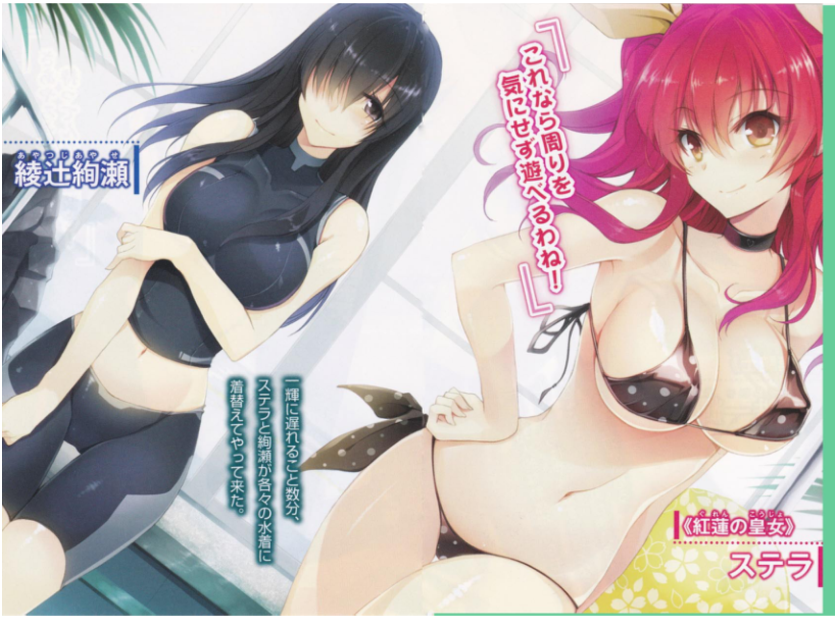
Boys took less time changing than girls. That was why, after changing into standard black and red trunks, Ikki waited outside for the girls. After a few minutes, he saw Stella and Ayase coming out while wearing their respective swimsuits.

Ayase, being overly serious and overly shy, wore a sports type swimsuit that could handle light fitness. But since she had a stylishly fit figure which she had trained since childhood, that swimsuit looked charming on her in its own way, despite not having much color.

But… the one who was really conspicuous was Stella. She wore a different swimsuit than when she barged in Ikki's bathroom, a black-laced bikini. Compared to Ayase's, her bikini obviously exposed way too much skin, and when she walked, those voluptuous, white, peach-like breasts of hers conspicuously bounced rapidly.

And it wasn't only just her breasts; her hips had enough sexiness to make a zombie gulp. A glamorous hip that leaped up with a *tsun*, something you wouldn't see much among the Japanese. From there, a beautiful leg line extended which was too dazzling to look straight at. Even though she had so much physical strength, how in the world could she maintain such a soft and alluring body? Even with

Ikki's dynamic vision, this was a mystery to him. And a deep one at that. He could find nothing but darkness while trying to analyze.


『これなら周りを気にせず遊べるわね！』
綾辻絢瀬
一輝に遅れること数分、ステラと絢瀬が各々の水着に着替えてやって来た。
《紅蓮の皇女》
ステラ

And finally, the most fascinating thing about her was....the way she walked. Probably because she was trained as royalty, Stella's attitude when walking was truly beautiful, like a model featured by the Paris Collection.

Yeah... Stella was so pretty. Without noticing, Ikki let out a sigh.

Not only him, every customer resting by the poolside, and even the ones swimming on the course had their eyes glued to the foreign beauty that just made her entry.

Stella showed her face in the media from time to time, so maybe a few of them knew her. So while having all the gazes concentrated on her, Stella—

"Sorry for the wait. Boys really do change too fast."

She spoke to Ikki. Instantly, Ikki felt a wave of killing intent, as if he was being pierced by invisible arrows.

"Huh! Hey hey hey, what!? Those two beauties are with that dude!?"

"Impossible…. A cute girl like her with a weak looking guy like him…!?"

"Hey hey! D'you really think the country will forgive you if the balance of a couple is so damn ridiculous?"

"I'll freaking kill the bastard!"

I might die an unfortunate death by drowning today.

While Ikki was sweating cold sweat, Stella was surveying the whole pool with a curious expression. Since they were living together, he might have lost sight of it, but Stella was, in fact, a princess. This might have been the first time she had come to a commoner's pool.

The pool was only 50 meters long, smaller than the ones at campus. It was divided into two parts, one for the course and one for public. Since it was only June, there weren't many customers yet.

"It's quite big."

"Vermillion-san is a princess right? Then there's a pool in your home too, right?"

"Nope. But if it's our bath then it's about this wide."

"Wow! Amazing! That's just like a celebrity!"

"Well actually that one's for our servants to use. The one for us royalty is a little smaller. I mean, it's lonely if there are too little people and the bath's too big."

Now that Ikki recalled, Stella's style of living wasn't really that different from a normal person's. Well, other than the fact that she was surprised by instant coffee. The Vermillion Empire wasn't that big of a country. Maybe the royalty there lived quite the humble life.

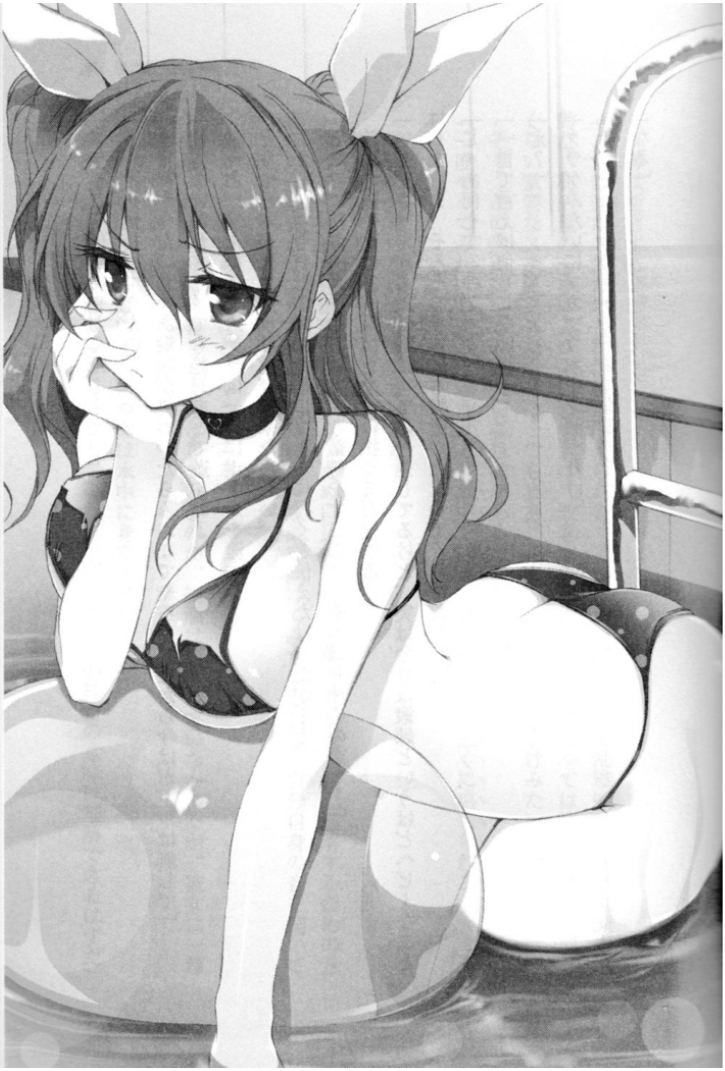
"But still, I'm relieved. I was worried about what I would have to do if I had difficulties with the rumored Japanese rudeness, but since there aren't too many people I'm not worried anymore."

"Well, that's because it isn't really the season for pools and all."

"Then we can have fun playing without worrying too much right!?"

Saying that, Stella brought out a beach ball with an excited expression.

"No. We didn't come here to play you know."



"Eeh! Then why the heck did you come to the pool?"

"Why did Stella come?"

"U-ooh! And after I went through all that trouble to bring it…"

"…'Kay. We'll play after we finish training. But no balls for now."

"Guess I don't have a choice…. But you absolutely have to play with me later!"

Stella passed the ball over to Ikki. It seems like she really did come to play today. Strange. He had already told Stella that they were coming to train today.

"By the way Kurogane-kun, what kind of training are we doing today? Swimming?"

At Ayase's question, Ikki shook his head.

"No, well, we've been talking about training this and training that for a while, but today we're not going to something so heavy as to be called that. Your body's almost at its limit too, right?"

"Then what will we do?"

"Frankly speaking, we aren't going to do anything."

"Eh?"

"You're going to float and drift through the pool like a jellyfish."

"I-Is that going to be of any use?"

"It will."

Ikki guaranteed it.

"Firstly, it'll raise your lung capacity. In a sudden fight, this is very important. This will do for anaerobic training. That's because the one with the least lung capacity will make the sound first and lose. For us swordsmen, this is something just as important as physical exercise and strength.... Well, for today, this is just an extra benefit."

There was actually a deeper meaning behind this training.

"I think you'll understand after going through it once, but when you're underwater, you will feel much closer to yourself."

"?"

Ayase probably didn't understand what Ikki meant. She tilted her head, which was a bit cute for her.

"When you're underwater, you won't be using your strength to stand up, nor will you be concentrating to understand what you see. Simply turn all your consciousness to yourself, and try to hear your own echo."

"…I don't quite get it but… I'll give it a try."

She didn't quite understand why Ikki was making her do this, but she didn't have any reason to doubt him. Following his words without complain, she held her breath and submerged her body underwater. If it was someone proficient like Ayase-san, then she should be able to understand its meaning with just one try. Ayase could probably hold for three minutes like that underwater.

"Then I guess I should go put this ball back in the locker. It will be bothersome to leave it here anyways."

With that, Ikki put away the ball Stella had brought.

Part 3

After Ikki left, it started to become boring for Stella.

It was not like she had any bad blood with Ayase. It was that she didn't really understand much about Ayase and her swordsmanship, so there wasn't anything to talk about. Moreover, she didn't want to disturb her training with useless chatter.

Bo~ring…

Because she had time, she had also tried to do that training Ikki mentioned. She had held her breath, and had entrusted her body to the water.

It wasn't painful. Stella's lung capacity actually surpassed that of even Ikki's. If she tried, she could even stay underwater for 10 minutes. She was already on a superhuman level.

…*It's so quiet.*

It wasn't as if there weren't any people at all. There were other customers who were swimming, and the merry voices of the children echoed around. But underwater, there was nothing, When she looked up, the surface of the water felt far… as if the world itself was in a faraway place.

On the other hand… she could hear her own pulse. The sound of her pulse that she couldn't hear outside because of all the noise and racket, the flow of her blood, her neural tracts; she could grasp all these much clearer now that she had shut out the random thoughts and noises.

「When you're underwater, you will feel much closer to yourself.」

This was what Ikki had meant. And for a knight as strong as Stella, she could understand this even without him saying it. To be able to understand this sensation, being able to feel your consciousness pass.

For example, the action of swinging a sword. That would be a combination of swinging the hand that was holding the sword, connecting the movements with the fingers, signals in the neural tracts, the expending of physical strength, swinging the sword is the same of ‘willing' all of these. In other words, this could make a huge difference. If she couldn't control these minutes… no, nano-seconds worth of details and actions of her body, then she wouldn't be able to use them in real battles.

But Ayase couldn't do it. If she could, then she wouldn't have forcefully tried to use that artificial form in the first place. That was obvious. She would have realized where the stress was born from, and where the loss occurred. Before, the reason why her condition got better was because Ikki had corrected her form. However, the condition of one's body changes every day. When that happens, the only thing that can be done is to assimilate with that properly. When one is able to do that, only then can they reach their true potential.

For that reason, this training was certainly productive for Ayase. But for Stella, it was unnecessary, because she was at a level where all of that would be done automatically by her subconscious. That's the reason why all her swings were adjusted to the very best possible form the other day, even though she was purposely trying to mess up.

But… I'm still too naïve.

Splashing onto the surface, Stella muttered.

Until now, Stella had been training herself more earnestly and sternly than anyone. She thought that she had pushed herself to the limit. But that was not true. Ikki's Ittou Shura, that was the absolute limit. She had not yet reached that place. Bringing out her all, and using it up within one minute, that was impossible for her. And that's exactly why she lost to Ikki in technique. Stella had better lung capacity than Ikki, of course, her strength, mana, firepower;

everything was far above Ikki's. But she was still pushed back and beaten. Because their way of living was also different. Even though Ikki was now standing on the earth, he was in a place even deeper than the water where Stella was, a deep dark sea where even the light could not reach.

And that was Ikki's world…. If she could reach that place, then she might be able to see something she has yet to discover.

Stella closed her eyes slowly. She was submerged underwater and all light vanished. Only the burning fire within her remained. Only she was there. She was within the darkness and the silence, on the receiving end of the vision of herself. But that was not even near the end of it, that depth was far from enough. Deeper…. Even deeper…, towards the great depths of consciousness where the 'Crownless Sword King' resided.

"By the way, is Vermillion-san dating Kurogane-kun?"

"Guehghgh. *Cough*Cough*"

Stella drowned.

Part 4

"It hurthsh, it hurts, my nose, it went *tsun*...*cough*cough*!"

While pressing down her nose, Stella cursed her incompetence. Even though she dived so deep in her consciousness, she could still hear voices. That was enough proof that her training wasn't nearly enough.

Ikki could block his sense of sight and hearing with his sheer will.

Rather, if she could control herself to that extent, Ittou Shura would just be a joke. Once again, Stella realized how far the place she was aiming for was.

"S-Sorry Vermillion-san. Are you okay?"

"Y-Yeah. I'm alright...."

"But that exaggerated reaction... as I thought...."

"T-That's! N-N-No that's not it! The second imperial princess of the Vermillion Empire dating that commoner! That's impossible...!"

"You're really not going out?"

"Of course not!"

"Then you wouldn't mind even if I deepen my friendship with Kurogane-kun?"

"Come again?"

Her reply automatically turned into a question.

"W-W-Wait a goddamn minute! Didn't Sempai say that you only wanted him to teach you swordsmanship!? And that there weren't any mushy feelings!?"

"That was in the beginning. But hey, you know how Kurogane-kun is like a warrior, somewhat cool. He even listened to the request of a stalker like me…. Even though he's younger, he's like an adult, right? He's also very kind when giving lessons, oh, and precise too. For me, he's like the ideal man. And recently, I've gotten used to talking to him. If he's single, maybe I should tell him that I lo—"

"N-Nooooo!"

Stella screamed unconsciously and interrupted Ayase's proclamation.

"No! No! Neveeeeeeer!!! Ikki's my boyfriend! So nooo!!!"

She waved her hands around in the water like a kid throwing a tantrum. She didn't want to hear someone other than herself say they ‘loved' Ikki. That's why, with eyes moist with tears, she drowned out Ayase's words with the ruckus and glared at her.

"As I thought…."

Seeing Ayase grinning with an amused expression, Stella finally realized that she had been tricked.

I-I messed up big time!

"I had a hunch that the mood at the appointment place was a little too lovey-dovey, but for it to be actually true…!"

"Ugh… uuu… Sempai, using such underhanded methods. I thought you were supposed to be more stupid."

"Vermillion-san, that was quite rude."

"Saying that after tricking me that way… you're definitely going to have to keep this a secret! It this gets out then it's going to be a nightmare."

"I know, because Vermillion-san is famous."

"...But, that stuff before... was it all a joke?"

Ayase nodded without indecision.

"I truly think he is wonderful as a man, but I definitely don't see Kurogane-kun like that. That would be a great betrayal towards Kurogane-kun who is teaching me the sword with such devotion. I had a hunch but.... Ahh! I'm jealous! I want to fall in love too~"

Ayase touched her blushing cheeks with a *pon* and her eyes glittered, as if she were a maiden having a dream. Stella found it quite unexpected to see her like that.

"I thought Sempai hated boys."

"That's a horrible misunderstanding. I love boys."

"Sempai. You shouldn't say stuff like that in a place like this. Just now, about six people had some light reaction."

"Anyway, I don't hate boys. Rather, I'm just too conscious of them all. That's why I get embarrassed. My roommate says that I seem gloomy."

This is the first time I've seen a person who said that without hesitation.

"Ahh~ But that's so lovely. I wanna fall in love too..."

"Then why don't you?"

"I-Impossible! Definitely impossible. If a virgin like me dates a boy... ahh! It's so embarrassing I'll die just thinking about it. So I just have to be satisfied with manga and light novels."

"What an awkward inclination."

"By the way, do you guys do naughty things when you're alone?"

"Koghku!"

Stella choked at that sudden fastball.

"W-W-What the hell are you asking so suddenly!"

"I really want to know how it feels like to be a real couple!"

The image of Ayase with her insanely sparkling eyes overlapped with the image of one of those media girls. Stella's image of Ayase being a stiff kendo girl shattered with a clattering noise. The girl in front of her was no different from any other girl, a monster with an interest for sensual love affairs.

"We haven't done it. Moreover, I haven't even registered in his family so that's way too soon."

"Is that so? In mangas for girls they do naughty stuff all the time without all that marriage registering and stuff, so I thought…"

"Yeah, that's right!? Speaking generally, isn't negotiating marriage before doing that obvious!?"

Stella was right to the point of being sad.

"But from the way you're saying it, you really want to do this and that with Kurogane-kun, right?"

S-She's really a person who just pushes right in. But, now after she's already gone through all that, there was no point of hiding it. Her unease might also lessen through talking about it. That's why, even while being deeply submerged in water, Stella expressed her inner desires.

"T-That's, I wouldn't go that far as to say that much but… I'd like us to be little more like real lovers, and do the things real lovers do…"

"Then why don't you just go with that feeling?"

"…If I could do that, then I wouldn't be suffering so much."

"Why?"

"I mean…, for a girl to suggest that, it's indecent."

"Is that so? But I thought wanting to flirt or do naughty things with your lover was natural. On the contrary, wouldn't it be unnatural if you didn't?"

…*Huh?*

Now that she thought about it that was exactly right. It was only natural for one to have desires about tying a deeper bond with one's lover. And it was the same thing for both men and women.

"But still, I think we should maintain the pace… and if I become too pushy, he might think that I'm a lewd girl, or hate me…."

"Well let's just say that there is such a pace, and Vermillion-san tries to break it by being pushy, but would Kurogane-kun be so cold-hearted as to hate you just because of that?"

"H-He won't!"

"Then what's the problem?"

"T-That's… huh?"

It was just as she said. There was no reason to object. Why didn't she realize this sooner? Stella tilted her head while looking at Ayase. Could this be? That ‘blindness of love' thingy?

"I think it's more appropriate not to waste the time you get to spend with the person you love. We humans are beings with ‘life', so no matter what, there will be a time when we have to part ways."

Ayase, with a drifting, adult-like gaze, spoke.

"…Just now… Sempai acted like an actual senior for the first time."

"By the way, and this is just my guess, but I think Kurogane-kun also wants to do naughty stuff with Vermillion-san."

"Why's that?"

"Vermillion-san was observing the pool when she entered so she might not have noticed it, but when you came in wearing that bikini, Kurogane-kun was staring at Vermillion-san with those super perverted eyes. His gaze felt so indecent, it was funny to watch."

"—!?"

God…. That was a mistake Stella would regret for her entire life. She should have noticed it. She grieved over the fact that she didn't notice it.

As Stella was being eaten by that lumpy disappointed feeling—

"Huh? Ayase-san already reached her limit?"

Ikki, who had gone to put away the beach ball, returned.

"No. I was just talking to Vermillion-san a bit."

"Is that so. Oh, how was it? That feeling of pressing your consciousness against yourself?"

"Yeah, I've understood the meaning of this training. So I'll try a bit more. Is it okay if I go try over there? I need some space by myself."

"I don't mind."

"Also, it seems like Vermillion-san has something important to discuss with Kurogane-kun."

"Wha—!?"

Stella raised a squeak that seemed like a scream at that sudden announcement. But as for Ayase, winking as if to say ‘It's my apology for monopolizing Vermillion-san's boyfriend the last few days♪', she quickly and discreetly distanced herself from the pair.

"I don't need that kind of apology!!!"

Part 5

After Ayase left, Ikki and Stella sat down on a bench near the poolside.

"So, what's this important thing you need to talk about?"

"…Erm…."

Stella wasn't able to reply so readily. Well, it couldn't be helped. Even though she was coaxed by Ayase's theory a while ago, when it came to it these kind of problems weren't a theoretical matter.

Why did she think that if she said ‘I want to do more lover-like things with you', Ikki would hate her? Why didn't she realize that Ikki wouldn't hate her over something like that? Stella immediately understood the reason for her lack of action after seeing Ikki's face.

Basically, she was embarrassed.

That was why she pretended not to realize it, making up an excuse and putting the matter on hold. Or maybe, she was thinking, maybe Ikki will be the first one to make a move? Something egocentric like that. But even so, for her to go and say ‘Kiss me' to Ikki just like that…

There's no way I can do something so embarrassing!

"…Stella?"

"Ah, S-Sorry! Important talk right? Erm…."

But as long as her escape route was blocked by Ayase, she had to say something….

"A-Ah, M-My swimsuit! The bikini I'm wearing today, how is it…!?"

"Of course, it looks good on you. You have a great fashion sense, and that kind of bikini really suits you."

Ikki smoothly replied to the question Stella made up on the spot with his usual kind expression.

But for some reason, that bothered Stella. Ayase had said that when he saw her bikini before, he had a really indecent expression. So why could he reply so calmly now? For some reason, it all looked like a façade.

"…Actually, I also have something important to talk about."

"Ikki too?"

This is unexpected. What could it be?

Maybe he wanted an impression on his swimwear too. Then how would she answer? For Stella, Ikki was always the coolest no matter what he wore, but putting that into words wasn't something she could easily do-

"Us… erm…. Our relationship, is it really alright like this?"

"Eh…."

"I've been thinking about this for a while, but we haven't done anything couple-like this whole month, it's been bothering me…."

Stella felt that the body temperature around her chest area dropped five times upon the words that came out of Ikki's mouth.

「We haven't done anything couple-like this whole month.」

Those were the words Stella feared. The line she was afraid to even think about. But right now, her boyfriend had said it. At the same time, the coldness that came with understanding enlightened her.

As I thought… Ikki isn't satisfied with our current relationship.

But he still endured. For a whole month.

He lost interest… in me.

Thinking back now, that was obvious. Ikki had Shizuku. He also had a beautiful disciple, who was older than him. There were also other girls like Kusakabe and the cute girls in their class. Around Ikki, there were many girls who cherished him. There shouldn't be a reason for him to care about a selfish girl like her, who wouldn't let him touch her for so long.

"…So, I wanted to talk about us."

No!

She understood what he wanted to say—that it would be better to return to their previous relationship.

She didn't want to hear that. She no longer had the will to talk with Ikki. She wouldn't be able to bear it if he continued.

So Stella—

"I-I know right! Actually I wanted to talk about that and not my swimsuit!"

Turning her back towards Ikki, her voice continued to leak.

"I-It was obvious right, this was impossible to begin with! For royalty and a commoner to be lovers! The status is too different! Even Ikki, you like girls like Sempai who let you touch their thighs and bottoms, right! Rather than a girl like me, who doesn't let you do that!"

"H-Huh? W-Wait a minute Stella! What in the world are you saying!?"

"W-What do you mean what! Break up, it's about breaking up right!? You don't need a girl who doesn't let you do that as a lover right!?"

"Wha—!?"

Ikki opened his eyes wide in surprise at her sudden outburst. For him, he had absolutely no idea what nonsense Stella was spouting.

"T-That's not it Stella! Just calm down and let's talk it through!"

Ikki said with a deathly pale face, and touched Stella's shoulders. He did that to try and calm Stella down but—

"Don't touch me!"

Stella shoved away his hand with a real meaning of refusal. At that moment, he saw something glitter between the surging red hairs.

Is Stella crying?

For now, Ikki had to know why she wanted to break up. If he flared up now, then it would all be over—that was what forced him to listen. But—

"If I did something to make Stella hate me then please tell me and I'll apologize. I beg you."

"…Ikki's the one who hates me."

"That's not true! Why'd you think that! I've never said anything like that!"

"I know even if you don't say it!"

"No, you don't understand at all! Please calm down!"

"I'm calm! *Hic*"

"No you're not! Why are you saying I hate you! For you to say that, aren't you the one who hates me!"

Ikki was just as confused because of the strange situation. His beloved Stella was trying to break up with him, so it couldn't have been helped. He loved Stella, and that was why he failed to stay calm. And his voice became rough, so it seemed as if he was shouting.

"T-That's not true! I love Ikki!"

"No, I'm the one who loves you!"

"Lies! I absolutely absolutely super love Ikki! When I asked you about my swimsuit, you were just talking about my outward appearance! You don't care about me at all do you!? Since I haven't let you touch me! That indecent gaze Sempai saw, it's obvious that it was you looking at Sempai's swimsuit!"

"What! That's rude! If you don't cut it out, even I'll get mad!?"

"Aren't you already mad, you idiot!"

"Because Stella keeps making false accusations! When the girl I love looks so fascinating and alluring, how the hell can I be charmed by another woman!?"

"Then why were you so calm and reserved when I asked you about my bikini!"

"Certainly, I was reserved when you asked that. But… but… there's no way I can just go ahead and tell the truth! That I was so aroused and my heart was thumping so bad, that I couldn't take my eyes off you! What if you think of me as a pervert, what if you come to hate me! And you too, even though you said you loved me, you didn't even hold my hand this past month!"

"I was the same as Ikki! There's no way a girl can say lewd stuff so straightforwardly! What if you thought I was a depraved woman and became disappointed!"

"Then why the hell are we fighting like this—!!!"

"I don't know, I don't understand anything—!!!"

Both of them kept shouting without realizing that there were people around them.

"".......Huh?""

At the same time, they realized that their tiff had turned into something stupid.

"A-Ah, excuse me, dear guests. There are also other guests here so if you don't mind, could you please take your lover's quarrel… or flirting, I'm not quite sure which, somewhere else where there aren't as many people?"

""——!!!""

They were being watched by all the bystanders, and they blushed red till the tip of their ears in an instant. As they looked around, they could see all the gazes on them, as if they were being watched by some inquisitive and curious animals.

"S-Sorry!"

"Please excuse us-!"

They both dashed for the children's pool beside the 50 meter one, as if running from the paparazzi.

There wasn't anyone there besides Ikki and Stella. Even the children weren't there, since it was not the pool season. They entered an umbrella shaped fountain in the heart of the pool. The flowing water there acted like a curtain so the interior couldn't be seen from the outside, and the sound of water drowned out their voices.

Only they knew what would happen there. It was an isolated place, and that's why…

"Ikki, please don't look this way now…."

"Okay. I don't want my face to be seen now either, so it's alright…."

For some reason, they felt excessively uneasy. It was good that they ran away together and all, but now that they realized their exchange earlier was just plain stupid, it was hard to look at each other.

…However—

"Hey… Stella."

"…What?"

"…Both of us together, shall we say what we want to do most right now?"

"…'Kay."

Certainly, it had been an idiotic quarrel, but it was not meaningless.

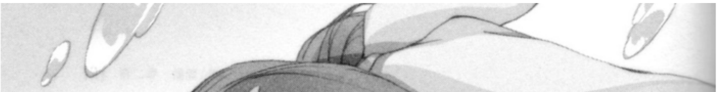
""I want to kiss.""

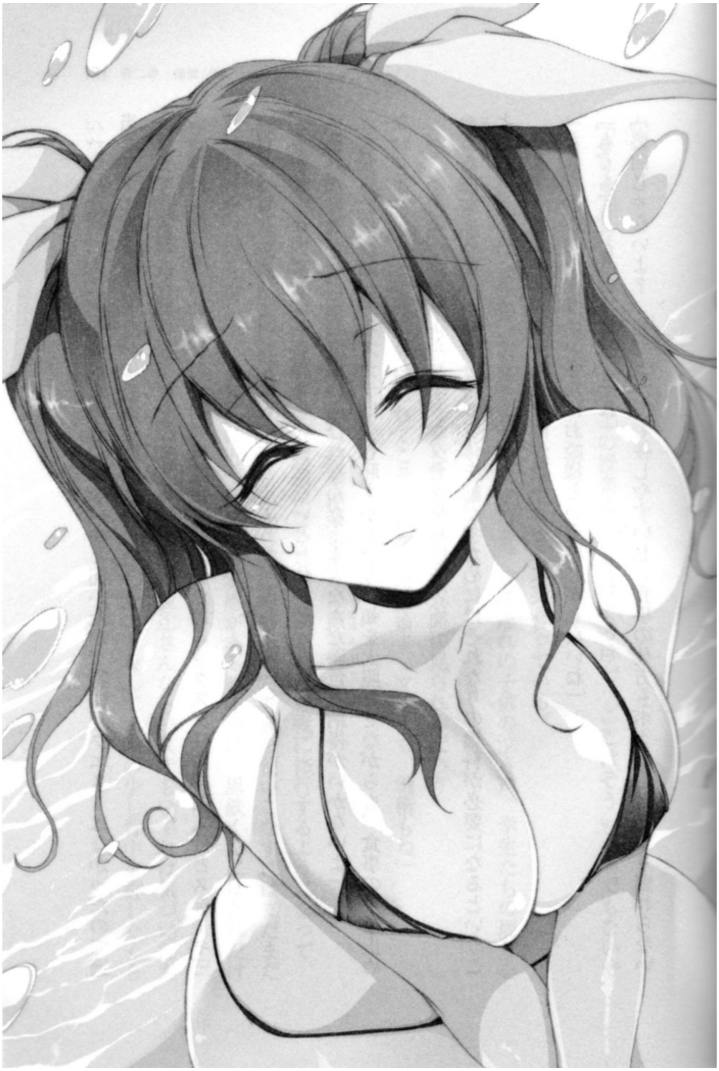
Because they realized that the person they loved also desired them so much. For a moment, they were both surprised a little, but they looked at each other. It wasn't embarrassing anymore, and they didn't avert their eyes.

Ikki's eyes reflected the upward glancing Stella, who slowly closed her eyes. There was still a tear drop at the end of her eyelashes. Ikki gently brushed it off, and with that hand he touched Stella's soft cheeks.

Pikun

And Stella's body firmed. Her soft cheeks and her long eye lashes dyed with a bit of unease. But she didn't turn away. She entrusted herself to Ikki. And that made him so happy, and he felt so loved….





Within the curtain and splashing sounds of water, Ikki's lips pressed against Stella's. Pressed… that wasn't quite correct, it was only at the level where they brushed against each other.

But it felt like their lips were on fire.

Of course. Since little pecks and kisses on the cheeks were done by friends and family, but they definitely didn't do mouth to mouth kisses. In other words, their relationship was more solid and more vivid than ever. They proved that the words that they said weren't simply words. Their first actual bond and proof as true lovers.

"…Hey, Ikki."

"What?"

"…Ikki, do you dislike indecent girls who wish to be kissed?"

"There aren't any men who dislike naughty girls. Rather, does Stella hate guys who look at her with perverted gazes?"

"I hate them. I'll only allow Ikki to do that…."

Once they had stepped forward, hesitation no longer existed. The second was far deeper, and more forceful then the first.

"Nn…."

It wasn't at the level where it could be called an adult kiss, but they both lusted for the other that was their beloved.

…And so, despite the confusions, that day became an unforgettable day for the both of them.

Part 6

By the time they left the pool, it was already sunset. The three were already feeling hungry, so they decided to have dinner in the city before returning to the dorms. Ikki asked the two girls if they wanted to eat anything special, but they didn't really have any preferences so he guided them to an appropriate family restaurant.

There, the three ordered what they wanted. Ikki ordered a large serving of wheat flour noodles, Ayase had a meal set, and as for Stella, she ordered four pieces of mix grill and three steaks.

"V-Vermillion-san has a very amazing appetite."

"…I've got no choice. If I don't eat at least this much, then my body won't move."

"Even though you eat so much… why do you have such a nice figure? For some reason, I'm not convinced."

Stella, who was aware that she ate unnaturally much, blushed a bit, embarrassed. But her hands didn't stop.

*Munch*Munch*

She chomped and crunched down her extra high calorie meal. Well, for someone with that much power, it would follow that she'd need a sufficient amount of fuel.

Seeing that, Ayase smiled.

"For some reason, Vermillion-san really doesn't look that much like a princess."

"*Munch*Munch* Huh? What do you mean by that?"

"I don't mean anything bad you know? Just that, you're easy to talk to, and the way you have meals isn't much different than ours."

"Well I've received lessons in table manners, but this isn't the place for such things now, is it?"

Stella surveyed the crowded interior of the restaurant. The clanking sound of tableware, the sound of customers and employees coming in and out, the sound of a child crying, the crude voices and laughs of high school students, everything mixed in together. In a place like that, if she was the only one with elegant table manners, she'd be regarded as the strange one instead.

"You have to know how to behave depending on the time and place, that in itself is an art. Both manners, and swordsmanship."

"Ahaha, that hurts."

Ayase smiled cheerfully even though her inexperience was pointed out.

"Today was… no, today too was very productive. Ever since I've started training with Kurogane-kun, it's been one new discovery after another…. I'm still not experienced enough to learn my father's secret techniques, but I feel a lot closer to him now. I can't express how grateful I am to you."

"It's all because of Ayatsuji-san's hard work. Besides, I think you would've resolved the problem soon enough, and arrive at the secret. All I did was give you a little push, so you don't have to be so humble."

"No… what I've learned, for me, it's very helpful."

"Is that because you're appearing in the representative selection matches?"

"Yeah. I'm already a third year. This is my last chance at the Sword-Art Festival. That's why I want to win, no matter what. I have to enter the Festival, and I have to take back what's important to me. That why right now I need power."

…*Hmm?*

In the depths of Ayase's eyes, Ikki felt a deep feeling. It was anger… and not just normal anger, close to a killing intent, a strong hatred.

—What pushed her so much that she….

"Hahaha, lookie here! I thought you look'd familiar so I was wonderin', but if that ain't Ayase!"

Suddenly, from behind Ikki a crude voice called out Ayase's name.

"—!?"

For a moment, Ayase's eyes dyed with the color of surprise. Where she was looking, there stood a man about 180cm tall with smudged, dyed hair and sanpaku eyes[1] hidden behind shades. Even though it was a non-smoking area, he was smoking a cigarette and wearing an unnecessarily flashy coat. From his bare chest, a tattoo of a laughing skull could be seen, and it was affecting on the surrounding customers too.

Seeing these traits, it was then that Ikki thought of a certain person. He was a member of the rowdy bunch Ikki saw when entering the shop.

"I haven't seen you around lately so I was wondering what had happened to ya, but for us to meet here. Haha, there are things like that, huh."

"Hey Kuraudo, who're you talking to?"

"Let's go to the arcade."

"Huh! Hey now, it's Ayase-chan. Long time no see~"

"I was worried since you didn't come to play lately! Gyahaha."

"You've grown quite tall? Oh?"

About ten guys looking like outlaws came in and gathered at Ikki's table behind the skull dude. It seems like they were acquainted with Ayase, but Ayase didn't even look at them…. She just bit her lower lips hard as if possessed by something.

Seeing her like that, Ikki's decided his next move.

"I'm sorry but could you guys leave? My companion looks troubled."

"Huh!? The hell are you!?"

"The f*ck are you sayin'? I'll kill ya!"

Even though they were ganging up, Ikki just ignored them. Ikki knew there was only one guy here worth fighting. He looked towards the one with the skull tattoo named Kuraudo.

As he did, Kuraudo asked Ikki a strange question while looking back curiously.

"…You, You're a swordsman?"

"You can tell?"

"Hah, somewhat. You bastards have this peculiar aura and all."

As he said that, he picked up a bottle of beer and a glass from the table.

"Sorry ‘bout that brother, for disturbing ya during a meal. I only came to talk since I saw a nostalgic face."

He poured the beer and held it in front of Ikki.

"I'll apologize, so take it."

"Ah, pardon me then."

He wanted to say it's not Kuraudo's beer, but it wouldn't be wise to aggravate the guy. Ikki reached to take the beer Kuraudo offered.

"Ikki!"

"Kurogane-kun!"

Skull-head bashed the beer against the back of Ikki's head.

Part 7

The other customers immediately screamed. The bottle smashed and fragments flew off. It had been bashed against Ikki's head with so much strength that he bent and crashed against the table.

"HAHA! A swordsman shouldn't fuckin' let his guard down you idiot!"

"AHAHA, he did it!"

"As expected of Kuraudo-san, what a nasty son-of-a-bitch!"

"Just lie down and watch!"

At the skull tattoo's sudden cruelty, the guys around him crudely cheered.

"My thanks. Ya see, I love breaking you swordsmen bastards to pieces. Now let's do this. You have one, don't ya? A Device!"

The man took out a sparkling white bone-colored nodachi[2] with a blade like a saw's. His Device.

That's right, the pointlessly flashy coat he was wearing was the uniform of Donrou Academy, a knight's academy of Tokyo just like Hagun. This man was a Blazer just like Ikki.

"This bastard! I hope you're prepared to be burnt to ashes!"

Seeing Ikki get hurt, incandescence started to blast out of Stella's blazing hair as she raged. She was going to take out *Lævateinn* but—

"Stop it, Stella."

She was stopped by Ikki. Ikki stood up, as if nothing happened.

"…There's no need to make a fuss. His hands just slipped a little."

He said to Stella with a smile while bleeding from his forehead.

"W-What are you saying!?"

"And I was only scratched and my got clothes wet. Nothing to fight about."

Ikki controlled Stella while saying that. If she took out her Device and started a fight, it wouldn't just end with a suspension. It'll definitely be expulsion. That's why Ikki stopped her. But….

"""BU-BUAHAHAHAHAHAHHAHA—HAHAH—HAHAHA!!!"""

It seems the skull tattoo's company thought of it as a coward's retreat and started to insult him with their fingers pointed.

"Hey hey hey, seriously! He is still so frivolous even after suddenly having his head hit."

"Well I get Kuraudo-san's scary, but that's so spineless."

"Kyahaha, no more, I'm gonna burst, so lame~!"

"Haha! This is surprising. A coward even though he's a swordsman. Do ya even have balls?"

The skull dude showered Ikki with insults and laughed amusingly. But Ikki didn't reply and only showed a bored smile. Seeing that, Kuraudo spit.

"-!"

At that, the voltage of Stella's anger rose once more but Ikki pressed her down. Even with that, Ikki didn't snap, so the skull dude showed a bored face.

"Hah, this is boring. If I fight a chicken like you, it's already my loss. Come on you bastards, we're leaving."

Saying that, he went towards the exit.

"Bye bye, little coward."

"Isn't that nice? Kuraudo doesn't bully the weak."

"That's right, That's right. Isn't it nice that you're so weak? Ahahaha."

After they left, a man who looked like the shop manager ran towards Ikki. He bowed to Ikki while sweating like crazy.

"My apologies dear customer! Are you alright!? I'll call an ambulance…."

"Aaa, I'm okay I'm okay. Rather, do you guys have a first aid kit? I need to treat this so could you lend it?"

"Y-Yes. Please wait a moment!"

Asked by Ikki, the manager brought the first aid kit from the crew room hurriedly. The other workers were trying to calm the customers. For now, the situation was handled with the least fuss as expected. Ikki confirmed that while wiping off the spit.

"…Somehow, your face inflated twice as much, Stella."

Ikki told Stella, whose pouting side of the face looked like a puffed balloon.

"Of course I'll be mad! Being told off by that trash! And Ikki, you didn't dodge that beer bottle on purpose, right!? What's the big idea?"

"If I handled it poorly, he might've gotten even madder… and I can't possibly start a fight in a place like this, can I?"

"Well… that's that but… Ikki could have taken care of that trash without even using *Intetsu* right?"

"Now, I wonder about that."

"What do you mean?"

"The guy with the skull tattoo in the middle's quite strong. A hard opponent to fight empty handed."

"Well, of course that would be hard. He did rank among the best 8 in last year's Festival, after all♪."

Ikki and Stella were both dyed with shock when a boy with an almost impossibly bright voice suddenly butted into their conversation.

Why would they be so surprised? That was because the owner of the voice appeared on a table with scattered dishes without any presence or shadow, almost as if another film was suddenly inserted while watching a movie.

Dimly silver-colored hair and gold eyes without any sign of light. The boy talked to Ikki with a smile that seemed almost plastered to his face.

"Ahaha ☆Iyaa~ What a calamity, what a disaster! To get mixed up with the infamous ace of Donrou Academy, the 'Sword Eater' Kurashiki Kuraudo, a killer hound who bites anyone he lays his eyes on.... But your decision was correct, Worst One."

"Kusukusu… Eeh, absolutely. You were right."

In the next moment, another person appeared, but this one had an aura that couldn't be more obvious. Even though it was inside the shop, she carried a parasol, and wore a hat with a huge rim. The tall woman's eyes couldn't be seen because of the large hat, but her chin line was visible and with the glistering blonde hair, her figure could be made out. She wore a pure white ball-line dress, like a noblewoman, that glimmered in their eyes.

Even though she had a pure white figure, both Ikki and Stella felt a fleeting, incomparable feeling of disgust. What she wore was complete white, yet, her presence, for a moment, felt more like thick fresh blood.

And why would that be? Ikki knew the answer. In her presence, there was a veil of dense blood fragrance that could not be hidden no matter how much perfume she wore. …There was no mistake, this person was the real deal.

"If you guys retaliated, then right here, right now, we would have had no choice but to suppress you people."

The white one with a presence of death and blood replied in an old Japanese lingo as if she were singing. That was too unpleasant to Stella who had already raised her guard. She asked Ikki with a small voice—

"Ikki, who are these people? …What are they?"

"The vice president of Hagun Academy's student council, Misogi Utakata-san, and the treasurer Toutokubara Kanata-san."

"…Toutokubara! You are…?"

It was a name Stella had heard through rumors many times.

Toutokubara Kanata, otherwise known as 'Scharlach Frau'. She placed second in the inner school ranking and was a B rank knight. While being a student, she was summoned under special circumstances and was allowed to fight in real battles. She had a record of destroying many organizations and bases of the Rebellion army. She was indeed a superior student knight with real battle experience.

"It seems like we don't need to introduce ourselves… but still, the way Kurogane-kun handled the situation was truly brilliant. Sword Eater is a person who attacks people from other schools unannounced, and goes around town smashing dojos. In any case, he becomes quite hard to handle if enraged. Thanks to you, we were saved from quite the trouble too. Once again, we thank you. It appears that we have been underestimating you too much."

"It seems like it wasn't a fluke that Renren was defeated. This ability of yours that sees through a person's character in battle, just like Yaksha-hime said. We need to reaffirm our recognition of you."

"Ahaha. Absolutely…. Well then, show me your wound please. I'll treat it."

"No, you don't have to go through the trouble."

"It's okay, it's okay♪. Just leave it to Sempai. Pain, pain fly away~!"

Saying that, Utakata touched Ikki's wound.

"Okay, it's healed."

The ripped skin and the internal bleeding was all healed within a moment.

"Wha—!"

Ikki was greatly surprised.

Certainly, the wound was shallow. He didn't dodge it and there wasn't much damage, but it had still reached the marrow. It could be called a ‘violent' wound. Even Shizuku, who had A-Rank magic control, would take a bit of time to heal it.

No, this couldn't be called ‘healing'. It was as if the wound itself disappeared. It definitely wasn't just healing magic.

Misogi Utakata, nicknamed 'Fifty Fifty'. Just what was his ability? No doubt it wasn't anything normal but…

"Ahaha, you don't have to observe me with that scary face. I didn't enter in the selection matches."

"Ah, I apologize. Even though you healed me, I was being rude."

"Ahaha. It's okay it's okay. That's what makes you a knight. Well then, we've finished our kouhai's treatment so we'll take our leave now. Let's go, Kanata."

"Yes, Vice President."

"You guys, too, keep your nightlife in check."

And with that, Misogi Utakata and Toutokubara Kanta left.

With their departure, Ikki sighed, feeling a surge of tiredness hitting him upon seeing the dusk from the window.

…Twilight of Disaster… should be appropriate huh.

They met one big shot after another today. However, he couldn't always be swept along by the aura of those who had already left. For Ikki, there was something he was more interested about.

"…Hey, Ayatsuji-san."

"!"

She might had been aware that the conversation would move towards her. She averted her eyes with an unpleasant expression. But Ikki asked anyways.

"What exactly is your relationship with those people."

The other party knew her name. Ayase wasn't someone so famous as to appear on the media. That meant they knew each other personally. But from the looks of it, it wasn't a friendly relationship. That was obvious after seeing Ayase's gaze. So—

"You don't need to answer if you don't have to. But… when they called out to you, Ayatsuji-san wasn't behaving normally. If you've gotten involved into some kind of trouble with those guys, then I can lend you my strength."

As a friend, he was in the position to help her. Hearing Ikki say that, her expression softened a little and she tried to reply.

"…That's…."

At that moment, the student datapad rang out, notifying that a mail had been received. The noise came from both Ikki and Ayase's pocket at the same time. Ikki wondered who could have sent it. It was the Selection Battle Executive Committee.

…He had a really bad feeling about it. His worst fears were confirmed after reading the message.

"Contender Kurogane Ikki's selection match tenth opponent has been decided: third year class one contender Ayatsuji Ayase."

…What timing.

Without a doubt, the mail Ayase got was the same. Looking at her, one could see the blood drained from her face.

"This is, a-ah, I'm sorry! My roommate, I-I got a mail from my roommate telling me to return immediately, Please excuse me for today!"

Her face paled. What she said was a lie. It was the notification of the match, and that was what made it awkward.

"…Yeah, then I'll see you tomorrow."

Guessing that, Ikki didn't restrain Ayase. He was curious about the relation between Ayase and Kuraudo, but it wasn't something he needed to pry out of Ayase right now. This feeling of awkwardness didn't recede, and he could just simply ask later.

"…Yeah… then tomorrow."

Picking up her stuff from the table, Ayase hastily departed, as if she were running away from Ikki and Stella.

"She looks awful. What happened?"

Ikki showed the mail to Stella who didn't comprehend the situation.

"…Well that sucks…."

"This is probably that irony of fate thing. If I had a choice, I wouldn't want to fight her."

"Speaking of which, didn't Sempai mention she entered in order to take back something important to her?"

"Yeah."

"You won't lose on purpose, will you?"

"Do I look like a guy who'd do that?"

Stella looked at ease with that answer.

"You don't. Sorry, that was a foolish question."

That's right. Ikki would not do that. Even if the opponent was Stella, or Shizuku, or anyone for that matter, he would fight fair and square head on. That was a knight's honour. But in the end, he would have liked to avoid fighting with Ayase.

...She said she'd see me tomorrow but, Ayatsuji-san probably will not show up for training for a while.

His guess hit the bull's eye. From that day on, Ayase didn't appear before Ikki even once.

Part 8

"But still, that guy from today was a real masterpiece huh."

"Haha, I guess that's the type you call a weak bug."

"He's still so frivolous even after being humiliated so much, la~me."

"That's not true, Misato. Not opposing Kuraudo-san is a wise thing to do, right?"

"Kuahaha. Right, right. It's only natural to avoid fights you can't win."

In a place that seemed like their base, a gang of young men were spouting tasteless words while smoking cigarettes. The topic? The shameful sight of the man they saw in the family restaurant.

"...Haha, you guys think so?"

At a short distance, Kuraudo was drinking alcohol while gazing at the moonlight that entered through a collapsed portion of the roof.

"Yeah, of course. That bean sprout ain't got the guts to stand up to you Kuraudo, much less beat ya."

"That's right. That chicken, he isn't even worth being your opponent. Even I can beat him with one hand tied behind my back."

"Gyahaha."

ChatterChatter**

What was so interesting? They resumed their laughter.

"Haha."

Seeing them like that, Kuraudo once again looked up at the moon.

…Morons. You guys don't understand a thing.

He remembered the gaze of Ikki looking straight at him. There were no traces of fear or nervousness there. There was only cold calmness like flowing water. How could he solve the situation with the minimum trouble was the only thing that Ikki had been thinking about. The fact that he received Kuraudo's attack was also part of that plan. He was a person who gave off that type of aura. There's no way he couldn't avoid a surprise attack of that level.

"What a high-level bastard. You're telling me that provocation of that level won't make you budge huh… Hahaha."

Well, that was alright. A man of his level would definitely make it to the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival.

Smashing that bastard, I'll look forward to that moment.

Kuraudo gulped down the alcohol in his glass, while his chest throbbed in anticipation of the resistance that would come from the kind of dangerous quarry he hadn't seen in a long time.

Part 9

It was the third day that Ayase hadn't joined them for practice. She didn't even appear before them despite it being the day before their match. At that fact, Stella let out a bored sigh.

"In the end, she didn't come even once… Sempai."

"Oh my. Isn't that a good thing for Stella-san? Weren't you jealous of Ayatsuji-sempai for occupying most of Onii-sama's free time?"

"…Shut up. This is this and that is that. For her not to be here is lonely in its own way."

"What a selfish person… but that may be one of your good points."

"Did you say something?"

"Your leg is fat."

"NO IT'S NOT!"

Ikki looked at the pair having their usual conversation while wondering whether they had a good or bad relationship. He had his student notebook in his hand.

Arisuin's tall figure approached Ikki.

"She hasn't been in contact at all?"

"…Well."

"Really?"

Ikki raised his head and looked at Arisuin. Arisuin had his usual steady smile, but his eyes looked as if he was searching for something.

"...Why do you doubt it?"

"Isn't it just simply that I'm worried? I don't get a few things but Ayase-san was quite clear about her resolve to reach her goal. And for that reason she said she'd need to appear in the Festival. That's why it wouldn't be good for her to lose tomorrow's match against Ikki."

The number of people who'll be selected through the matches is six. According to their homeroom teacher Oreki-sensei, each student will get about 12 matches. That's just enough for that number of people to remain undefeated. In other words, it would be better to think that losing just one match would mean being kicked out from the competition.

"But in a normal fight, she can't hope to win. That's obvious. The difference in strength is too great. She knows that the best, having been taught by you. Therefore, she would obviously make plans to win beforehand. Am I wrong?"

"Alice really is sharp."

Ikki shrugged, and tossed his notebook to Arisuin. There was a single mail displayed there. The sender, Ayatsuji Ayase.

「I have something important to discuss with Kurogane-kun. I want to borrow your power. Tomorrow at 3 AM. Meet me at the rooftop of the main school building.」

"I got it this morning."

"This feels too much like a trap... I guess."

"Ahaha... certainly. But this isn't a trap."

"You're sure?"

"Because I believe in her. Ayatsuji-san wouldn't do something so low. I've only trained with her for a few days, but I could understand at least that much."

To Ikki, Ayase was an overly serious, hard working, and honest person. And besides—

"She said she liked my hands."

She told that to a person who had the hands of a labourer, rough and tough. She, who could respect another person's hard work to that extent, definitely wouldn't do something so lowly in a match between knights.

"That's why I'll go to meet her."

Ayase was an important friend. And his friend wanted to consult him. He couldn't refuse that. Ikki made that clear. And so, Arisuin—

"You're dazzling."

While smiling bitterly, Arisuin stretched his hand towards Ikki, who was so close to him… but his eyes suggested that Ikki was too far away, as if his hand could never reach him.

"Dazzling?"

"Yes, very. To the point it makes me jealous. People like Stella-chan and Shizuku who can love someone so wholeheartedly, and Ikki who can trust someone so honestly…. Seeing that, reminds me of how ugly I am. For me, I can no longer trust someone so easily."

But after saying that, Arisuin made a serious face unlike any other and gave Ikki some advice.

"But that's exactly why I can realize some things others don't…. This might be me being too nosy but just in case, Ikki should have the resolve to cut ties with her. If you remove the mask of humans, you won't know what lies beneath. If you handle this situation lightly, you might not be able to win a match you're otherwise sure to win. Like what happened to the Hunter."

"Now that I think about it, Alice was the one who advised me back then too right? But it's okay. I've already decided what's the most important for me."

Saying that, he looked at Stella who was still quarreling with Shizuku.

—To meet once again at the battle for the summit. That's what he promised her. That's why—

"I don't intend to break my promise with her. No matter what happens."

"Fufu. Seems like it wasn't something I should worry about. Pardon me, I said something unpleasant."

"It's not like it was unpleasant…. But regarding Kirihara-kun's case, and even this time, I really wouldn't like it if someone called my important friend who had always given me important advice ugly. Even if it's Alice, you yourself."

For a moment, Arisuin showed a troubled expression. But he soon dismissed it.

"Fufu, saying something so cool…. I'll end up falling for you."

"Please, your gender is the only joke here."

Arisuin replied with his frivolous chatter, so Ikki replied in the same manner. He didn't prolong it any further. Even if he tried to ask more, Arisuin probably wouldn't say anymore. That's why… he concentrated on the closer matter.

He looked up at the rooftop dyed by the mad red of the sunset. Tomorrow, she would be waiting there for him.

I wonder if I'll be able to help her…?

Part 10

Ten minutes before the appointment, Ikki left his room, taking care not to wake Stella up. He passed the corridor there without making a single sound, and came outside. Using the pale moonlight as a guide, he headed for the school building. As he approached the school building bathed in moonlight, his footsteps echoed.

Normally, this would be a bustling place, but now, it had an almost deadly, serene atmosphere. Ikki headed for the roof, while enduring the silence that almost made his ears go mad.

He climbed the stairs one by one, and finally stood before the ironclad door to the roof. He opened it.

The wind blew through, and he was showered by the pale moonlight.

A tasteless scene that spread before him. A concrete floor and a rough steel fence that defiled the night sky. A cold scenery.

The blowing wind, the dim moonlight, even though it was early summer, they all felt cold. And standing in the middle of the scenery, with her back to the fence, was the yukata-clad figure of Ayatsuji Ayase.

"Hey, I haven't seen you since the pool, Ayatsuji-san."

"Yeah… even though I was the one who asked, sorry for neglecting it."

…*Hmm?*

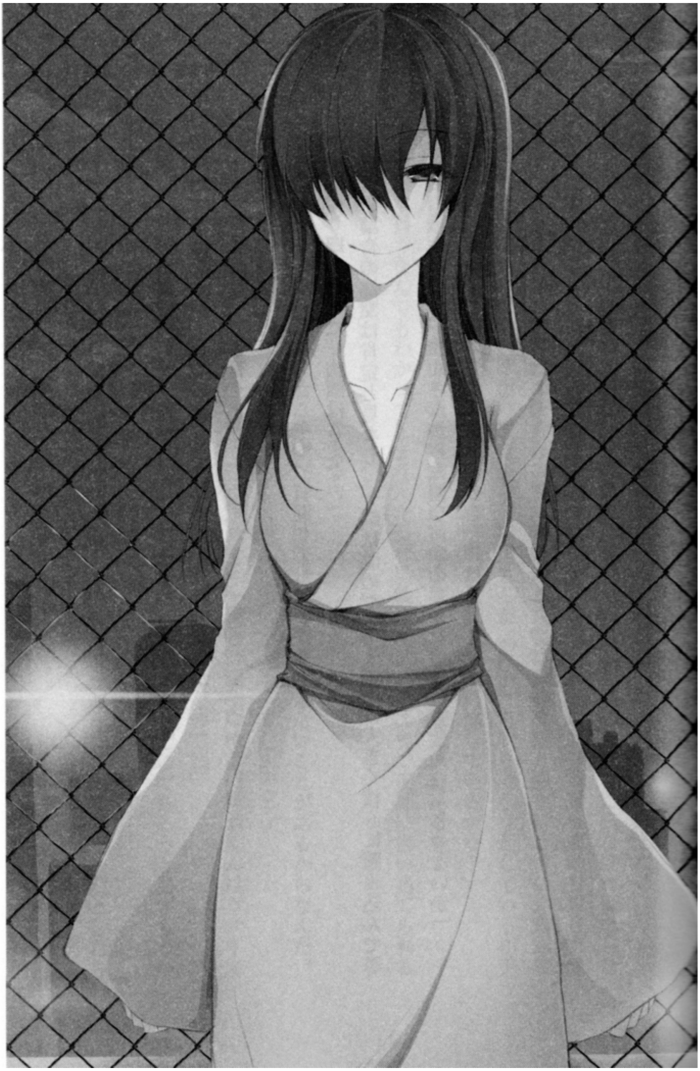
Ayase, who had an apologetic face, looked a bit uncomfortable to Ikki for a moment.

The gaze that was sent straight to him looked dry.

As if her eyes were artificial glass balls.

She had become used to Ikki recently, and Ayase didn't have to avert her eyes for every single thing now. But that day at the pool, when he restarted the conversation with her, her gaze had also felt dry. Well, it might be something natural for a person who wasn't used to the opposite sex.

But for some reason, the gaze of today's Ayase bugged Ikki even more.



Was she the type of woman who could look straight at me so calmly in the middle of such a serene night?

…But even though you could call it uncomfortable, it was only a little bit. So it wasn't something Ikki had to go out of his way and ask her. That wasn't the reason why he had come here today.

"It's alright. After that mail, things turned sour anyways."

"Yeah, saying that helps… and besides, you came alone, like I told you to. Thank you for that. But is it really alright to leave your girlfriend and come here in the middle of the night?"

"Aah, so you noticed huh. Keep this a secret from Stella though. She'll bite me half to death if she finds out."

While joking and agreeing with her, Ikki finally went to the point.

"…Then, what was it you wanted to talk to me about?"

"—"

Ayase went silent. Was she hesitating to talk? Or was there a different reason for her silence? Ikki couldn't make a judgement, since he couldn't read Ayase from her almost artificial eyes.

But it wouldn't do if the silence continued like this.

"If you aren't going to say it, then may I ask a question?"

Ikki opened his mouth. Ayase didn't. This time, he took it as an affirmation and asked once more.

"Continuing from our previous conversation, was it Kurashiki Kuraudo who took away something important from Ayatsuji-san?"

Ikki didn't miss the swaying in Ayase's eyes.

"…Why do you think that?"

"Just a guess. During lunch that day, when Ayatsuji-san said ‘I'm going to take back what's important to me', you released an amazing amount of killing intent. And you did that another time afterwards, when Kuraudo appeared."

Ayase was looking down while biting her lips. Ikki concluded that it was the same thing he felt during lunch, that killing intent.

"And Ayatsuji-san said she had to appear in the Festival to do that. In other others, you had to fight someone who'll also be appearing there. Sword Eater was in the best eight last year. As long as

Donrou isn't using a special system like Hagun's, his place in the festival is certain. From these two points, the person Ayatsuji-san is trying to face, the one who took that important thing from you, is the Sword Eater, Kurashiki Kuraudo. Am I wrong?"

Ikki tried confirm his suspicions. And—

"Fufu, as I thought. Kurogane-kun understands everything. Since you've gotten this far, I don't feel like hiding it anymore."

Ikki's guess had hit the nail on the head.

"Hey Kurogane-kun. The reason I called you here today was because I wanted to ask you something."

"…Ask me something?"

"Yeah. I heard from Vermillion-san at the pool, but Kurogane-kun has a promise with her to fight her in the deciding match in the festival right?""

"Yes, that is, if I can get there. But well, we'll fight somewhere in time, that's about it."

"But before that happens, what would Kurogane-kun do if you faced an enemy you absolutely can't beat?"

"…?"

Ikki couldn't get the meaning of the question. Why did Ayase wish to know about him and Stella? But instantly, he understood that the question also applied to Ayase herself. For Ikki it was a promise; for Ayase it was to take back her important thing.

Even though their reason differed, their standing was similar. …She was asking another person to confirm her situation, was it that?

He couldn't understand. But his reply was decided—

"I'll fight with all I have fair and square."

"Even if you lose."

"You won't know until you try… Even if I lose, I won't stop until I've used all I have."

During his match with the Hunter, Ikki almost gave up once, but because of Stella, he managed to compose himself. The wound one gets from the enemy after one loses a fight can be healed, and then one can fight again. But the wound receives from running away from a fight can never be healed. That's why even if he were to lose, Ikki would fight with all he had; enough to be proud of himself. Ikki would never lose sight of this again. However—

"I don't think like that. Righteousness without results is just caprice."

Saying that, Ikki received an icicle-cold gaze from Ayase.

"Eh…?"

It was too unexpected to hear that from Ayase. Ikki gulped down.

He didn't…. Ikki didn't expect to hear something like an ‘Anything is fine as long as I win' kind of line from Ayase.

…*Why, would she.*

The Ayase Ikki knew would never say that, so when he heard her he couldn't reply immediately. But… even if he couldn't reply, he noticed. Beneath Ayase's cold eyes, her lips twisted into an insulting smile. An expression that Ikki never saw Ayase make.

When Ikki saw that expression of hers, two questions came to his mind.

Is this really Ayase? Rather, is this the real Ayase?

And to the confused Ikki, Ayase replied with that mocking tone.

"That's why this is my reply. No matter what I have to do, I'll take down my enemy. No matter what."

In her right hand, she materialized the vivid red sword *Hizume*.

The shriek of a sword cutting through something echoed into the night sky.

Part 11

"—!?"

Ikki prepared himself upon hearing the sound of the sword. Without a doubt, Ayase had used some kind of ability right now to cut something.

…But exactly what did she cut?

Ikki raised his caution level to the highest. He collected his consciousness and in return for cancelling out the sense of colors and sound, he put the maximum amount of concentration in situation recognition.

He noticed the strangeness immediately.

In front of him was Ayase. Behind her, the fence for some reason was collapsing backwards. Why? Because the hooks of the fence were cut.

There were no sounds. Without a doubt she had used some kind of ability.

What was her motive? Why was it necessary to cut that?

Ikki who was confused while not understanding the reason… was pushed into even further confusion with what happened next.

For some reason, Ayase was also falling backwards with the fence, falling from the roof of the four-storey building.

"Wha—!?"

Surprise, shock, but he didn't let this cloud his judgement.

He couldn't understand the meaning behind her actions. Did she fail? Or was there some meaning behind it? …He couldn't understand. But, now wasn't the time to think of stuff like that.

Instantly, a blue aura surrounded Ikki. He had invoked Ittou Shura.

He pushed his strength to the limits in a matter of seconds. He dashed toward the fence and grabbed Ayase. Ikki, in his Ittou Shura mode, could easily land even if it was from the 4th floor. But he couldn't use it more than once, and its power lasted for a very short time.

He ran vertically on the wall of the school building. He caught Ayase and pulled her towards his chest.

"As expected."

"Y-You, for that… you're willing to risk your life!?"

"Yes. Didn't I already say that no matter what I had to do, I would win? If Kurogane-kun's answer was the same as mine then I might've thought otherwise, but of course, Kurogane-kun is ‘just'… Then I have to use force to win. Kurogane-kun beats me in swordsmanship, and he also has a trump card, Ittou Shura. There's no way I can win against that. Then all I have to do is remove that trump card. I hear you can only use it once per day. And you've used it. The match starts at ten. You won't recover in time. Even if I can't beat you with the sword, now that you don't have Ittou Shura, I just might be able beat you with my ability as a knight."

Ikki bit down at her explanation. It was as she said. Ittou Shura was a technique that pushed him to the limit. It would use up his strength, all the quantity of magic that he retained. To counter that, all she had to do is make him use that magic before the match. He wouldn't be able to use it again. But—

Was I wrong…. Did I fail to understand her?

Ikki truly thought Ayase was an honest hard worker. That she wouldn't be able to do something that spat on another's hard work like this. The Ayase who was proud of her father's swordsmanship, who was happy being just a little closer to her father's teaching, who sometimes acted like a child just by learning something new, was it all just a facade?

"…When I first saw Ayatsuji-san, I was happy that there was someone other than me in this school who was so devoted to the sword. I thought we could become friends."

"I am truly grateful for your guidance thus far. I will use it all to defeat Kurogane-kun."

"I didn't think you were the type to do this kind of thing."

"I'll be troubled if you push those expectations onto me."

"…! Sword Eater might've taken something from Ayatsuji-san. But what Ayatsuji-san is doing is an insult not only to me, but Stella, Shizuku, and everyone else participating in the festival! It's an insult to what we knights pride ourselves in! It's an insult even to you yourself, Ayatsuji-san! All this, for the sake of taking back that something. Even if you do take it back, can you be proud of yourself!? Can you proudly boast of the rewards with this!?"

"That's not something Kurogane-kun has to worry about."

Ayase completely ignored questions of Ikki, who seemed as if he was grieving.

"No matter what you say, I will definitely beat you. It wouldn't do if I won't."

And with that, she turned her back on him. That back wasn't that far away, but it felt so far away. Soon, he was unable to see it.

「Just in case, Ikki should have the resolve to cut ties with her. If you handle this situation lightly, you might not be able to win a match you're sure to win.」

He remembered what Arisuin had said. It was exactly like that. With this kind of complex feeling, his swordsmanship would get affected.

Then, should he cut it? His ties with Ayase. Cutting it, severing it… forgetting it all, was it really alright? …With that.

"—"

The reaction from Ittou Shura passed his heart like storm clouds.

While kneeling there, Ikki, for once…

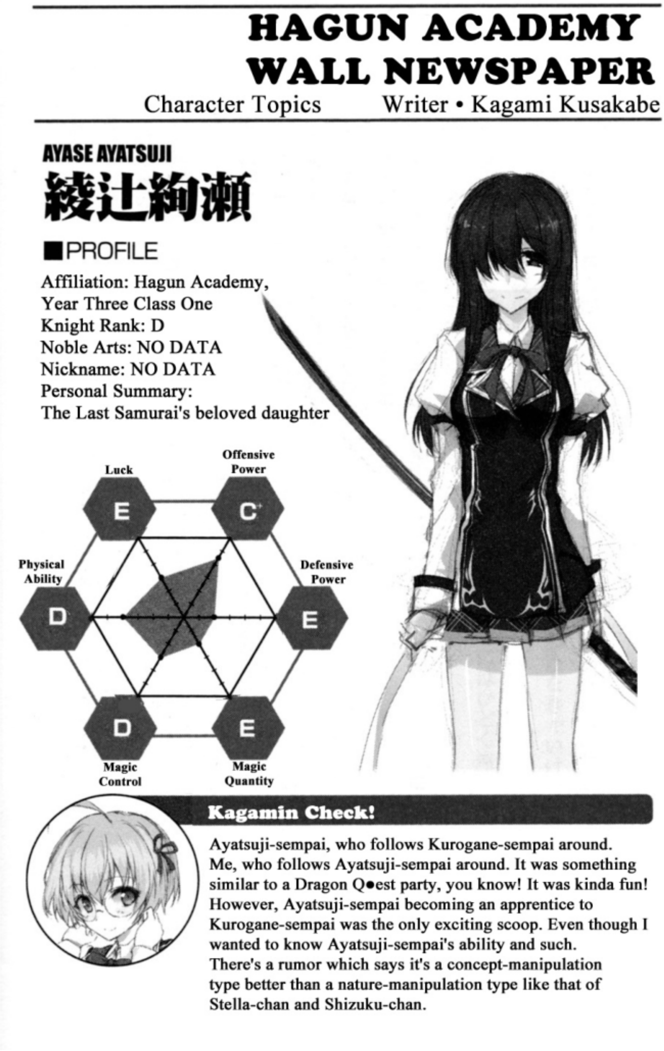
"Dammiiiiiiiiiiiit!!!"

…spat out an insult not directed at anyone, and struck the lawn.

References

1. ↑ *Sanpaku eyes*: Eyes where the white portions above or beneath the iris are visible. It is associated with ill health or mental imbalance.
2. ↑ *Nodachi*: A field sword, a long katana for use from horseback.

Chapter 3: Ayatsuji Ayase



HAGUN ACADEMY WALL NEWSPAPER

Character Topics Writer • Kagami Kusakabe

AYASE AYATSUJI

綾辻絢瀬

■PROFILE

Affiliation: Hagun Academy,
Year Three Class One
Knight Rank: D
Noble Arts: NO DATA
Nickname: NO DATA
Personal Summary:
The Last Samurai's beloved daughter

Luck: E
Offensive Power: C+
Physical Ability: D
Defensive Power: E
Magic Control: D
Magic Quantity: E

Kagamin Check!

Ayatsuji-sempai, who follows Kurogane-sempai around. Me, who follows Ayatsuji-sempai around. It was something similar to a Dragon Q●est party, you know! It was kinda fun! However, Ayatsuji-sempai becoming an apprentice to Kurogane-sempai was the only exciting scoop. Even though I wanted to know Ayatsuji-sempai's ability and such. There's a rumor which says it's a concept-manipulation type better than a nature-manipulation type like that of Stella-chan and Shizuku-chan.

Part 1

The morning before the battle with Ikki, at around 9 am, Ayatsuji Ayase woke up lazily.

She was napping in her own room after parting ways with Ikki at midnight. She was tired because of all the match preparations, and equally because of the negotiations with Ikki. After crawling out of the neatly arranged double bed, she saw a letter from her roommate on top of the table.

「I will not be coming to see the match because I was told not to yesterday. However, I want you to consult me if there is something troubling you. I am very worried whenever I see you because you have become gloomier nowadays.」

"...Truly, what a worthless woman I am."

Betraying a benefactor, and troubling her roommate this much—

「Sullying our pride, and even throwing aside your own. Can you still remain proud even if you manage to regain that 'something' with such means!?」

"...Ku."

The question, which had been thrown at her with a sorrowful tone, was still echoing deep within her ears. It was not a very good condition to be in. Even though there was a match she just couldn't lose today.

This had to be corrected immediately. She had to change the mood and lighten it up. Having thought that, Ayase decided to use the time in the morning to go to a certain place.

Part 2

About fifteen minutes by train from Hagun Academy's nearest train station, Ayase arrived at the intended facility: a large white building soaring into the cloudless summer sky. This was Shishido General Hospital. It was the nearest big hospital from the Hagun Academy. Room number 515 was Ayase's destination.

She directed herself with familiarity, arriving at her destination without incident, and opened the sliding door. Inside the private room was a solitary lonely bed. And by the bedside, there was a beautiful middle-aged woman sitting on a pipe chair. The middle-aged woman let out a sound in surprise when she looked at Ayase, who had just opened the door.

"Oh my, isn't it Ayase-chan!"

"Hello, Auntie Suzuka."

"Hi~ What's up at this time of the day? What happened to school?"

"Today I am free to decide whether to attend. Students who have representative selection matches are exempt from taking classes on the day of their match. That's why I made some time to come and visit."

"I see. Be it the selection matches, or the thing with roommates. The new principal sure does interesting things."

When she had explained the policies of Kurono, her aunt had given her consent.

Her aunt stood up from the pipe chair, went towards the bed, and—

"Big brother, your cute daughter came to meet you—"

—called out to the man lying on the bed.

Cheeks that had been hollowed, and disfigured into the shape of cheekbones; skin with cracks like those of dried up land, and hands, slim like twigs from winter. That man, who had withered like a mummy, was the father of Ayase. He was Ayatsuji Kaito.

"Good morning, Father."

Following her aunt, Ayase, too, called out to him. But Kaito didn't return the greeting. Without any response, he just continued to sleep.

That was right…. He had been continuously sleeping for two years.

"Well then, it'd be bad if a stranger disturbs father and daughter. I'll be at the coffee shop. Till what time are you gonna be here, Ayase-chan?"

"I have the match in the afternoon, so I'll leave at noon."

"Okay~ Then, I'll return somewhere around that time. See ya~"

Her aunt left the room while waving her hand in bye-bye.

She was such a cheerful person whenever Ayase saw her. Ayase wished she would share a little bit of that liveliness with her brother.

…No, even father was—

At that moment—

"…Ku…n."

Kaito, who was on the bed, moved his withered lips just a tiny little bit with trembling weakness.

"Father…."

It was the usual thing. He was whispering the same habitual words. She couldn't hear his voice. It was not in a voice which could be heard. However, Ayase remembered the movements of those lips.

(Sorry.)

"…Tsk!"

Krrr. Ayase's teeth ground together. Ayase bore the feelings of sorrow and vexation, which was almost enough to make her shout, by grinding her teeth. From that day, Kaito had always continued to apologize to Ayase. That he was not able to protect. That he was not able to entrust. All alone, eternally within that rainy season.

※ ※ ※

Listen well, Ayase. Never lose your pride no matter what. Our sword is the power to kill people. You people's gifts are the power to surpass other people. That is why you cannot lose your pride. If you lose it, your actions will just turn into mere violence. Always be polite, help the weak, and hate the wicked. Never ever let yourself be tied by your own power, and no matter what kind of opponent, always face them fair and square. Become a knight that won't be a shame to others, or to your own self.

Those were the words that Ayase's father, the 'Last Samurai' Ayatsuji Kaito, always told her. The responsibility of those who had power. Kaito understood it so well that he was able to impart the sword and its morals into Ayase who was born as a Blazer. To make sure that she would not become a cheap and arrogant human drunk on her own power.

Kaito's training, even if she had said it with flattery, was not a gentle one. Harsh. One could very well say that it was harsh. But, even so… Ayase loved the strength that Kaito talked about. She loved the gallant back of her father when he was swinging his sword. She loved Kaito's big and rough hand that used to caress her head whenever she showed growth.

A small dojo, about ten disciples, her father, and herself. By no means was it a luxurious lifestyle, but there was warmth in that flow of time.

It was a time filled with happiness. Ayase wished from the bottom of her heart that such a time would always continue.

But, that wish of her's was cruelly crushed. On that rainy day, two years back…. By a single man who barged in on her daily life.

※ ※ ※

It had been two months after Ayase enrolled in Hagun Academy. The rainy season had just arrived.　The season where the sky was covered by heavy rain clouds and even the wind felt damp and humid.

After class had finished, without returning to the dorm, Ayase was holding an umbrella within the rain and was moving towards her house's dojo. Her purpose was of course, to learn swordsmanship that she, no matter what, just wouldn't be able to learn at school.

When Ayase was in the first year of her middle school, Kaito was diagnosed with a heart disease that was impossible to cure even with cutting-edge medical treatment, and now he was barely able to swing a sword. The last time Kaito held the sword was when Ayase's admission into Hagun was decided. It was to entrust her with the secret technique that he himself had developed. To be blunt, his body was no longer in the condition to swing a sword. But, in the dojo, there were disciples who learned the Ayatsuji single-blade style from Kaito. Even if they were few in numbers, they were still warriors not unlike Ayase, whom from a young age had learned the sword under the Last Samurai.

Among them, Sugawara from cram school, although a far cry from Kaito, was way stronger than Ayase. That was why for Ayase to receive training from him, she traveled to her home three times a week. Because she wanted to become strong enough quickly to be able to use the secret technique that her father had entrusted her with.

Thus, commuting had, more or less, become a routine.

But, on that day, after passing through the left, opened gate for disciples, she met with a variant that was not supposed to exist within her daily life.

"Eh?"

The one she encountered was a tall youth who was holding an umbrella. His hair was dyed in a light color, and there was a cigarette in his mouth. His gaze was sharp like a hungry wolf, and a tattoo of a skull could be seen from inside the untidy uniform of Donrou Academy. A youth with an atrocious yet brutal appearance who was probably worlds apart from the appreciative world of dojos or martial arts.

Ayase, who was normally no good with the opposite sex, stepped back without thinking upon seeing the overbearing appearance of the teenager.

"...Huhu."

The boy, Kurashiki Kuraudo, laughed at that as if to tease her.

"See ya."

And disappeared into the gray town covered with clouds.

"Who was that person...?"

Why did someone with such a suspicious appearance come out of her house? To boot, someone who was wearing Donrou Academy's uniform. In other words, he was a Blazer. He should have no business with a swordsmanship dojo. Did he stop by to get directions or something? While thinking that, Ayase started walking towards the dojo inside the house.

And—

"Shit! I won't forgive that bastard!"

The voice of Sugawara, who could be said to be Ayase's childhood friend, resounded within the dojo. Wondering what happened, Ayase hurriedly entered the dojo after sliding the door open.

Inside the dojo the usual energetic sounds of swords could not be heard. Rather, including Sugawara, about seven disciples were standing still, doing their best to hold back their rage and shock. Their instructor, Kaito, was kneeling as well while keeping his eyes closed with a difficult expression on his face.

"What is going on? Did something happen?"

Ayase asked Sugawara.

"Just now, some strange punk just suddenly intruded on us, and asked for a match with the title of this dojo at stake."

"A dojo challenge, was it?"

"Yeah, but Sensei's body is already worn-out, and above all the Ayatsuji single-blade style forbids such matches with stakes."

Ayase also knew of that. The sword of Ayatsuji existed to protect. Kaito had always talked about it. It was a sword meant not to cause useless scuffles, or to show off one's strength. Under that notion, the Ayatsuji single-blade style forbade any and all fights except for official matches.

"That is why, Instructor had refused the match, and then...."

"That bastard insulted Instructor by calling him a coward, fiasco, and failure, and then he even spat on his face!"

"Even though he was just a mere punk! Acting high and mighty just because he can use some ability... kuh."

Disciples started raising their angry voices one after another. Since the time of their childhood, they had been visiting the dojo frequently, and they respected Kaito as if he were their own father. That's why they probably could not forgive that Kaito was made fun of.

Ayase shared that feeling. Someone had spat on her father's face. Just by hearing that alone her body's temperature had risen two times.

"Damn it, his footprints are still there. To think he came to a sacred dojo with his shoes on… tch. If Master's body was in perfect condition, that brat would have gotten his ass handed to him…."

"That is incorrect, Nitta."

Kaito responded in a sharp voice upon the words that one of his pupils said.

"I couldn't have accepted even if my body was in a perfect condition, because the Ayatsuji's sword exists to protect people. It is not a sword that should be swung for useless scuffles. This is not an era to protect people with the sword, but that purpose should not be forsaken or abandoned."

"Y-yes! I am sorry! I will reflect on this with all of my spirit."

Nitta bowed to the reprimand, which was filled with a peaceful yet sharp tone, of Kaito.

"Good. Others too, all of you have stopped their hand. As a punishment practice swing a thousand times!"

After explaining Ayatsuji's sword philosophy, Kaito swiftly changed the atmosphere of the place. The disciples replied with "Osu!" and followed the order. With that the usual liveliness returned to the dojo.

"Well then, Ayase-chan, hurry up and change into dojo clothes. After all, I can't let Ayase-chan turn into a Blazer like that who's drunk by his own power. I'll train you properly today, too."

"Yes, please take care of me!"

Ayase finally relaxed after seeing that the dojo had regained its energy, and hurried to the locker room.

But, on her way… she smelled a scent that she never smelled inside the dojo. That was the smell of tobacco left behind by him. That lingering scent would always, always coil around Ayase's beloved daily life like a snake with its menacing tongue out.

And worse, that premonition was right on.

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The next day. Just like yesterday, Ayase came to the dojo within the annoying rain.

"Hello~ …Huh?"

After greeting and opening the door of the dojo, she found Kaito, who was sitting on a cushion.

"It's only you, father? It's unusual for the others to be later than me."

"That's right, it's a first for all of them to be late at the same time."

Kaito tilted his head, puzzled. Although all of them were never late together, there were times where one or two of them would come late. It was probably a coincidence that all of them were late together.

"Well, they'll come around sooner or later. Now, since we're finally alone together after a long time, I'll personally see to your sword practice."

"I am happy that you will see it, but… you're not allowed to swing the sword yourself, got it? Since Father is sick."

"Ayase is such a worrywart. Don't worry, I'll just look it over. My body isn't in good condition because of the continuous rain these past few days."

Ayase decided to show Kaito the stances before trying the secret technique, which she learned from him when she enrolled into Hagun Academy, while waiting for the other disciples. Ayase aimed her wooden sword, and opened her stance a tiny little bit. She lowered her waist a bit and released strength from her shoulders. She traced the movements of Kaito from within her memory of that day. One by one, carefully.

But—

"No."

Kaito immediately rebuked.

"Don't loosen your hand when you release strength from the shoulders. Tighten your wrists more, but don't put too much force. All while keeping the stances in mind."

"Th-That is difficult."

"If you can't do it, then you won't be able to master the secret technique. I'll show you how it's done one more time."

After saying that Kaito reached for the wooden sword that was setup on the wall, but—

Stare

"...."

Stare—

"...I get it, I get it. I won't swing it, okay."

Kaito surrendered by raising both of his hands up to Ayase, who was looking at him from the back with a look of reproach in her eyes.

"For goodness sake, you really resemble your late mother in that regard. Your mother, too, reproached me by sending glares like those rather than saying it with her own mouth."

"It's only natural, because Mother taught me that if Father ever tried to do something stupid, I can stop him by doing that."

"It's not funny to be dominated by both generations of mother and daughter."

Kaito sighed once, and moved towards Ayase's back. He hugged her from behind and held on to her hands, which were gripping the wooden sword.

"Listen well: keep your wrists at this angle. The vital point behind this secret technique is not to disturb the stances by inserting too much power."

While explaining the vital point of the secret technique, which he had entrusted her with when she was going to go to Hagun, Kaito was simultaneously helping Ayase with her posture. Feeling the sensation of rough and stiff palms that were wrapped around her hands...

…They are big, Father's hands.

Ayase loved that sensation which could not be referred to as gentle.

Now that I think about it.… It's been a long time since the he last taught me this way.

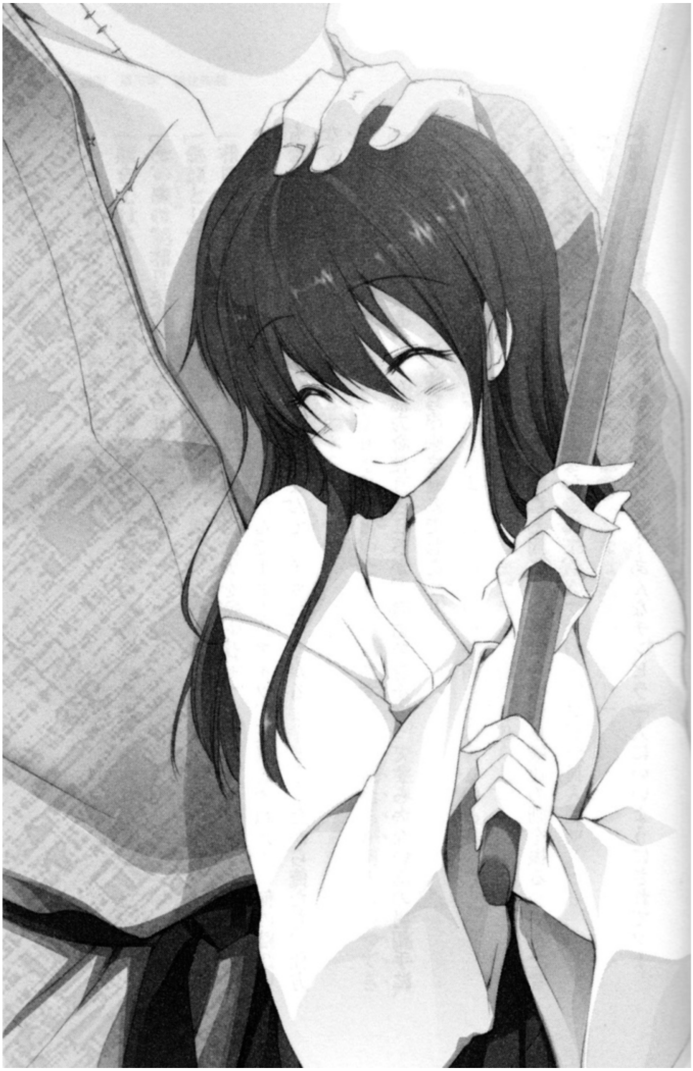
"…Fufu."

When she became conscious of that, for some reason she became extremely happy. Ayase squeaked out a smile.

"What happened? Laughing all of a sudden."

"It's nothing. I just thought it's been long time since Father taught me various things in this manner. I was somewhat happy about it."

Ayase suddenly leaned on Kaito's thick chest and brought her face closer.



Ba-bump Ba-bump While listening to her beloved father's heartbeat—

"…It would be nice if such a gentle time continues forever."

She whispered to herself.

"…."

Words from Kaito didn't follow. Of course, because Kaito knew that wish couldn't come true. Of course, Ayase, too, knew that. Kaito no longer had very long to live. The time when this heartbeat, which she was listening to right now, would stop was steadily approaching. That is why Kaito had taught the immature Ayase the secret technique which she could not handle right now.

For how many more years would Father be able to live?

She had already made her resolve to part with him. But that was why Ayase wished that the last day to be as tender as this moment.

-And that wish was betrayed in the cruelest of ways.

In that moment, the sliding door of the dojo suddenly opened. Ayase and Kaito turn their eyes over to the entrance, thinking that finally the disciples had come. Certainly, there was one of the disciples there. It was Sugawara.

But—

"Su-Sugawara-san—!"

Ayase's face turned pale in an instant. That was because Sugawara was there in a form that was painful to look at with bandages and gauze all over his body and face.

"Those injuries, just what happened?"

Kaito, who was shocked too, rushed to Sugawara's side.

Upon seeing his instructor run up to him, Sugawara for almost burst into tears, and...

"Instructor…. I, I am so sorry!"

Just like that prostrated, almost like hitting his head on the floor of the dojo. Although his face couldn't be seen, his sobbing voice could be heard.

Kaito immediately understood that it wasn't something trivial.

"Raise your head. These injuries… it seems you didn't get these by falling down or something. Just what happened?"

"Th-That is, we were done in by that man who came by yesterday…."

"What…!?"

"Yesterday night, when we were on our way back from dojo, he was waiting to ambush us seven…. Then, all of sudden he attacked us with a stick! That guy is insane! Without any hesitation he tried to smash other people's heads. He is insane, mad I tell you…. That's why, with no other way out, all of us fought back, but…."

Sugawara sobbed heavily once at that point, and—

"We were helpless! All seven of us together weren't even able to touch him when he wasn't using his ability, nor was he even covering his body with mana."

"…!"

Ayase gulped, shocked upon hearing those words. Including Sugawara, other disciples too, like Ayase, had been learning the sword of Ayatsuji since their childhood—and for them to be that helpless against someone.

That guy, he was that strong….

"Even though we were trained by Instructor for so many years… we were played around with by that delinquent! I am very sorry!"

"You don't have to apologize anymore! More importantly, are the others all right!?"

"…Nitta was beaten to a pulp and that's why she was treated with a capsule, but all of the others were hospitalized. "

Capsules could only be used by claiming health insurance; otherwise it would be very costly. Therefore, it seemed within the seven of them, with Sugawara and Nitta out, five of them were still confined to bed. The ones with severe injuries were diagnosed with injuries such as their arms would never return to normal, et cetera.

After confessing all of that, at last Sugawara raised his head.

"Sensei… we were able to come this far because we admired you. We wanted become proud men like Sensei, but… I really don't want to say this but just what were we doing for so many years…!?"

He asked Kaito while weeping.

"…."

Upon seeing her elder-pupil's miserable figure, Ayase was at a loss for words. The head coach, Sugawara who taught Ayase the sword, couldn't be seen anywhere. Those eyes were stained with fear and despair. His heart had been twisted so much that he won't be able to return to his usual self anymore. Wrong, it was not just Sugawara—

"I am sorry. We won't touch the sword from now on…."

While crying heavily, Sugawara pulled resignation letters for seven people from his pocket. Yes, just like Sugawara here, the other six, who were not present, also had their hearts broken.

"Cruel…."

Why did he do something like this? How can someone do something like this? Even though everyone gave their best since childhood and walked straight down the path of the sword. How can someone play around with peoples' hearts and break them? Ayase could not comprehend it.

And the man who did such incomprehensible things—

"Haha! I came around at an interesting time."

""!?""

He appeared in the dojo as though he was aiming for such a timing.

"To think everyone quit, maybe I bullied them a bit too much."

"Hi-hiiiii!"

The moment Sugawara saw that figure, he screamed like a girl flapping his four limbs to hurry inside the dojo.

"Hey, hey, don't run away like that. You'll hurt my feelings."

Kuraudo stepped inside the dojo while laughing in a vulgar manner.

"D-Don't come, please don't come inside, hi-hiiiiii!"

"S-Stop! He's getting scared!"

Not being able to see the pathetic figure of her comrade who had always walked down the path of the sword with her, Ayase stepped forward to protect Sugawara.

But her shoulder was grabbed by a rough hand. It was Kaito.

"What business do you have here?"

"The same business as yesterday."

"I thought I had refused."

"I just thought if I drop by today I'll get a different answer. Hahaha!"

"I see. So, just to drag me out you did such things to my disciples?"

"Ya. But yesterday I wasn't able to get my hands on that woman there."

"...Why?"

"Huh?"

"Why do you do such things? Aren't you a Blazer? Be it school or the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival, you should not be lacking in opponents wherever you run wild. In spite of that why do you obsess with me so much?"

"Don't ask me something weird again, old man. Does the edge of a warrior's heart dull when he retires?"

"…!"

At those words, Kaito slightly widened his eyes.

"Haha…. Well, it's all good. The reason is simple, it's because I want to show off my strength, my power. It does not matter if they are Blazers or normal people. I want to show it to every single one who catches my interest!"

Ayase burned with anger at Kuraudo's motive, which he had just spoken about as though he was snarling at Kaito.

"For something so worthless… you did such cruel things!"

"Worthless? Ha! What is? I just want to get it on with someone strong, I want to crush strong people. Aren't feelings like that natural?"

"Don't mess with me!"

She wouldn't stand around as this guy did whatever he wanted.

"It doesn't matter how many times you come, the answer will still be no! This is not a place where someone like you can just barge in on, because we don't swing our swords around just to show off our strength! Father, let's call the police immediately!"

But, Kaito whispered.

"No, I can't let it go like this. The Ayatsuji single-blade style dojo accepts your challenge. Whoever gets in the first two strikes wins the match. We will only use wooden swords. Real swords are not allowed, got it?"

Of all things, Ayatsuji Kaito went ahead and accepted Kuraudo's challenge.

"Wh-Wha, Father!!!"

"Se-Sensei!"

The moment they heard of his motive to accept Kuraudo's challenge, the two disciples, whose faces had turned blue, tried to stop Kaito.

"Please stop it, Instructor! You shouldn't fight with someone like this! Above all, your heart…!"

"That's right, Father! You won't be able to fight with that kind of body! If you want to do it that bad, then I will fight in your stead!"

Kaito's daughter, Ayase, and even Sugawara, who had curled up with fear of Kuraudo, tried to stop Kaito desperately. But Kaito smiled slightly at that.

"Thank you, you two. I take pride in the kindness of you two who worry about me, but that is precisely why—"

The words that were spoken before had been burned into Kaito's mind.

「Just what were we doing for so many years…!?」

"There is no way I can forgive this guy who hurt you all!"

He couldn't leave this to others. He had to defeat this man with his own two hands. Kaito stared at Kuraudo like an ogre, and in his eyes there resided resolve and determination.

Upon seeing that expression, Ayase was at a loss for words. She had already understood it, that now he would not be stopped with her words.

"…I understand. I won't stop Father if he is willing to go that far. I, too, will see this through as the judge."

"Yes, I will leave it to you."

"Win at all costs… Father."

A violent voice called out to Ayase, who was wishing as though praying, from the side.

"Hey, if you're done talking then let's get started already. I've got tired of waiting."

"...I know."

Ayase frowned at the voice she didn't want to hear, then hit the ground with her heel and threw a wooden sword at the demanding Kuraudo.

"Haha, what a violent woman."

"Rules are, like Father said, the first one to get two strikes on his opponent wins. The weapons of this match are wooden swords. The use of mana is forbidden. Is that clear?"

"Yeah, it wouldn't have any meaning if it's not a match on equal grounds."

Kuraudo's canines gleamed like fangs when he smiled. His eyes were, now, looking only at Kaito.

On the other hand, was Kaito concentrating? He was just standing there with the wooden sword in his right hand, and with his eyes closed.

It seems that both had completed their preparations. That's why, Ayase as the judge—

"Then, both of you stand in front of each other. Start!"

The match of those two had started.

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"Haha! Here I come!"

The moment when 'start' was shouted, Kuraudo ran towards Kaito, covered in winds. He obliterated the distance by pure leg strength, and swung his sword down on Kaito's head. There wasn't even a trace of technique in that single stroke, which ripped the atmosphere. He had not transmitted power from his legs, nor used lats by closing his armpit; he didn't do any of those.

It was a wild swing with just the power of his arm behind it. Obviously, it was a sword play belonging to an amateur.

Fast!

Even from the eyes of Kaito, who was a master, that swing seemed abnormal. He concluded that it would be dangerous to receive it upfront. Kaito quickly escaped the trajectory of the slash by sliding his feet to the side.

In that moment, Kuraudo's wooden sword grazed the tip of Kaito's nose, and split the floor of dojo.

"What monstrous strength…!"

Ayase, the judge, raised her voice, feeling awed. It couldn't be helped because a slash, which was capable of splitting the floor, had grazed her father's face.

But, Kaito was different. He purposefully let it graze him. Adjusting the distance by sliding your feet was a basic skill of swordsmen. He did so, because it was to keep the opened distance short for him to counter. A full swing enough to split the floor; of course, the opponent wouldn't be able to take defensive stances soon enough to block the counter. That single moment becomes the deciding factor in a match with a master as an opponent!

And countering was Ayatsuji single-blade style's forte.

The moment when the tip of Kuraudo's sword plunged into the floor, Kaito slide his foot forward shortening the distance by half a step. That was Kaito's attack range.

"—!"

Kaito let out a small sigh and, this time, he was the one who attacked. Aiming for the same body area as Kuraudo, the head, he brought down his sword. But Kaito's swing was beautiful, incomparable with Kuraudo's barbaric swing, and faster. That speed was the same as light's. Even if he was sick, he had been still known as the Last Samurai in the past. The extraordinary genius. The very idea of comparing his sword play with an amateur's was foolish. Kuraudo, who had missed on his very first attack, could not escape the fate of being hit by that swing.

Or so it was supposed to be.

"Hahaha!"

Thump

Kaito's hands became numb after receiving the recoil of his own attack. It was not the head of Kuraudo that he felt he had hit. It was the wooden sword of Kuraudo that was launched at Kaito's attack. He repelled it with his own sword. Kaito's bone cracked because of that impact.

"You seem to be surprised, old man. Did you think you would be able to wrap it up like that?"

"…Yes. To tell you the truth, I didn't think you would repel it."

That was truly a surprise. One could say it was completely unexpected. But Kaito wasn't just some inexperienced swordsman to be shocked by every move of his opponent.

That's some instincts he's got there.

It seems he had predicted Kaito's counter. That reaction speed could not be explained any other way. It was beyond the speed of humans.

However, it was not a problem even if he stopped a move. Kaito still had tricks up his sleeves.

"Here! I'll return the favor!"

Again, he swung down his sword just like before without any beauty, with the same speed and at the same place.

Obviously, that power was truly dreadful. There was no doubt that his wooden sword would get crushed if he received it upfront.

Even so, Kaito received it with his wooden sword. Was he not able to escape? No, this was Kaito's plan. If his counters were not going to work, then he didn't need to dodge the attacks.

The moment the two wooden swords clashed, before his wooden sword could break, Kaito moved his wrist, and changed the angle of the wooden blade with which he received the attack, and let the impact of the attack out.

Because of that, Kuraudo's wooden sword slid out and he lost his posture.

Dodge and receiving are just a part primitive defense mechanism. Martial arts exist on a higher level. It creates groundbreaking defensive techniques.

In other words, that was a deflection. It involves receiving the opponent's attack and then using that same attack's power to parry it off. With it the opponent floats; he loses his balance and a decisive opening is forcibly created. And this time for certain, Kaito seized that opening.

"Ha… ha…."

The moment when the judge, Ayase, confirmed the state of affairs—

This feeling….

After feeling the resistance from the strike, Kaito felt his heart throb.

…What is this feeling?

"As expected of Instructor! Your movements didn't seem like a sick person!"

"Father… amazing….! As expected, Father is amazing!"

The disciples raised their voices in delight after seeing him score the first point. To that, Kaito smiled at them concealing the inexplicable bad feeling that was welling up inside his heart, and then moved his gaze back towards the enemy.

Kuraudo was standing up while holding his side.

"Hahaha… As one would expect of the Last Samurai, this is the first time I've received such sharp blow. However… is this all you've got? —If so, you'll die, old man."

Even after receiving the first strike, Kuraudo still did not lose his fighting spirit. The light in his eyes, still burning and hungry, pierced Kaito.

"As if. It starts from here on, brat."

"Good… then, I'll be coming at you seriously, too!"

While smiling like a brute, Kuraudo once again closed the distance by charging in with pure leg strength, and for the third time, swung his sword downwards.

He doesn't learn…! Such an amateurish move.

Certainly he predicted and parried the counter. Those moves were something. But, he just swings his attacks around with emotions and brute strength. That kind of sword play, with just power behind it, didn't pose any threat to an excellent swordsman.

I'll end it with this…!

Kaito, once again, took the stance for deflection with his sword at his left side. He'd deflect the attack, and finish it. Kaito, Ayase, who was watching from the side, and Sugawara, too, believed that.

At that moment, Kuraudo's wooden sword disappeared like mist.

Wha…!?

In that instant, the sound of Kaito's ribs breaking echoed inside the dojo.

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Kaito fell down after being hit in the torso by Kuraudo's wooden sword. He violently convulsed, but Kuraudo got a fair point in, to which no one could complain about.

However, Ayase didn't have the composure to calmly announce the point, because on the floor, Kaito was suffering from lung hemorrhage while holding his side. The amount of blood being lost was excessive. It was obvious from one look that his internal organs had ruptured. Realizing that, Ayase ran over to Kaito with a pale face.

"Father! Are you all right!?"

"Don't come!"

But, Kaito, while still spewing blood, stopped Ayase who was approaching him with a loud and strong voice.

"The match has not ended yet…! If you can't judge fairly then step back!"

"This is not the time to be saying such things!"

"AYASE!"

Kaito, who was still spewing blood, shouted at Ayase who was still coming towards him, having ignored his words. Ayase was scolded and shouted at multiple times in the past, but this time it was entirely different. She felt fear, as though her heart was directly attacked. His shout was like a wild animal's roar.

"This is my battle! Don't interfere!"

"A… a… Fa… ther!?"

Ayase lost her standing at Kaito's serious shout that she had never heard before.

"Don't worry! …I'll definitely win!"

Kaito stood up while spilling blood from his mouth. His red eyes were fixated at just one point, towards Kuraudo. His burning fighting spirit seething.

"Here I come! Boyyyy!!!"

Kaito dashed.

"Haha! The result will be the same no matter how many times you try."

Kuraudo took him head on. For the third time their swords clashed. However, it was just one-sided now. Kaito had already suffered a fatal wound. With his offense and defense it was becoming clear that he had rusted due to not having held the sword for several years.

He was being pushed back. He was being pushed back mercilessly by random swings, which didn't contain even an ounce of beauty or technique and were only swung with pure, brute force. Now, he could not even attack, and he was just barely parrying the random attacks.

And, to deliver the ending blow to Kaito, now, whose entire body was covered in wounds, Kuraudo once again released the same attack that took one point from Kaito before. Aiming for the torso.

Kaito quickly took a defensive stance to that. A stance intending to receive the attack. However, just before clashing with Kaito's wooden sword, Kuraudo's wooden sword once again disappeared like mist and hit Kaito's body.

This time it was swung down on his skull.

It was incomprehensible. How did a sword, swung towards the torso, come from above the head. That action had probably surpassed the abilities of humans. Was it some kind of trick? They could not understand it. No one could tell what it was.

However, the wooden sword, which swung down, certainly existed above Kaito's head and mercilessly crushed his skull. Or so it was supposed to be.

"What!?"

That strike which was supposed to be the decisive blow didn't strike Kaito's skull and ended up falling towards his nape. The attack broke his collarbone. Kaito barely avoided it so that it won't become a point.

"Kuh…. You can't call this a point… boy!"

"Haha, you're just someone who failed to die! Don't struggle!"

After kicking Kaito in the stomach, and widening the distance between them, Kuraudo once again resumed his violent barrage of attacks. Even if an attack on the collarbone didn't count as a point, it didn't change the fact that it drained Kaito's stamina. Kaito's movements were now dulled to the point they were incomparable from before, and they lacked their usual brilliance, and then uncountable blows were delivered to Kaito.

The sharp attacks of the wooden sword broke his bones, cut his skin, and splashed his blood all over the dojo. Even then… even then, Kaito didn't let him hit the places that would give away the point. Even when his whole body was covered in blood, he still stood on his two legs and continued to fight.

…*Why!?*

Ayase could not comprehend Kaito's actions. It was obvious who was going to win. Even so, why didn't they stop fighting? Why didn't he surrender?

"Stop… stop already!"

Sounds of flesh being smashed echoed. And every time they echoed, Kuraudo's red-dyed wooden sword splattered blood.

"Hahahahahahahahahahaha!"

Kuraudo, who was covered in blood, laughed. His laughter resounded.

Now, Kaito was just being hit around. It was no longer about victory or defeat, it was no longer about the match. Ayase broke into tears, and could no longer see what kind of expression Kaito was making or if he was even conscious at all.

If she didn't stop this.

If she didn't stop this.

If she didn't stop this, her father would be killed!

Ayase understood that, but, even so she could not move. Even when Kaito's blood soiled her clothes, and even when Kaito's teeth broke and got stuck to his cheek. She was not able to gather power in her waist because of Kaito's roar from before.

"Stop, please stop it! I don't need this dojo! Just please stop hitting Father!"

Ayase could only scream. But, Ayase's scream… didn't reach the two who were standing on the verge of death. Kaito still didn't surrender, and Kuraudo didn't stop swinging his sword.

"—"

In an instant, Kaito, whose entire body was covered in blood, unleashed a final strike. He aimed his wooden sword from between his eyes towards Kuraudo, and advanced.

"Oooooooooooooooo!!!"

"!"

Did he sense something from the dying prey who could only defend pointer blows? Kuraudo's expression stiffened. But Kuraudo didn't retreat rather he swung his wooden sword down with all his might. He aimed for Kaito's head who was advancing towards him.

Even towards the nearing wooden swords that was tearing the air, Kaito didn't stop his advances. No, rather he did not even move his wooden sword that was held between his eyes, and he didn't take precaution towards the lighting like slash that's coming down from above.

It was suicidal attack. The meaning of that seemingly reckless conduct—

That stance is—!

Ayase knew it. That was the result of the Last Samurai Ayatsuji Kaito's entire life, the secret technique of Ayatsuji's sword. The only hidden technique capable of breaking this situation.

But… there is no way Kaito, who had become weak due to illness and injured in the battle, would be able to use it.

"Ssstttttooooooopppppppp!!!"

The merciless attack broke Kaito's skull and consciousness.

"Ah…."

The second point was taken. The moment that was settled, Kaito's body fell to the floor.

"Aaaaaaaa!!!"

Ayase ran towards Kaito, half crazed. She called out to him numerous times, but Kaito didn't respond. Kaito's mouth was just spilling out fresh blood.

"No, nooooo!"

"…Hmm, this is boring. This got settled pretty quickly."

With a *Clack*, Kuraudo threw the wooden sword he was using in front of Ayase. It was dyed dark from blood, and there were a few cracks here and there due to having broken so many bones. Upon seeing the state of the wooden sword, Ayase's consciousness got covered in red because of the amount of killing intent she was emitting. That hard wooden sword had continued to hit her father until it became like this.

"You fienddddd!!!"

Having lost all reason, Ayase charged towards Kuraudo after materializing *Hizume*.

But the arm that was about to swing *Hizume* was caught by Kuraudo and he easily lifted Ayase's body up.

"Don't lose your temper like that, I have no interest in weaklings."

"Let me go! Let me gooooo!"

"First of all, this isn't the time for you to go at it with me, am I right?"

After saying that, Kuraudo threw Ayase on top on Kaito's body.

"Tch!"

With that Ayase, too, remembered what she needed to prioritize and do.

"Sugawara-san! Ambulance! Call an ambulance! Hurry!"

"O-Okay!"

Ayase gave out orders to Sugawara who was standing in a corner of the dojo. Meanwhile Ayase franticaly tried to wake Kaito by calling out to him. After looking at those two with a cold and bored look, Kuraudo left the place, leaving a few words behind while departing.

"Pack up all of your luggage and leave. This place doesn't belong to you guys anymore."

Ayase gritted her teeth in bitterness. At that moment, Kaito let a sound resembling a moan from his chest.

"So…r…ry……."

"Father!"

She looked at Kaito, but he was still unconscious. He was just letting out words of apology like weak sighs.

Part 3

Two years ago, on that day, Ayase had lost everything. The dojo's sign, its land, and everything else was stolen by Kuraudo… and she had not met with the other disciples ever since.

And, Kaito, too, having been cruelly beaten, had fallen into a coma. He had still not woken up. Kaito was still inside that nightmarish day, and… he still continued to apologize till this day.

Sorry, sorry.

To his disciples that he was not able to protect. And to Ayase because he let everything of the Ayatsuji single-blade style get stolen.

…Father might not able hold on until this winter.

That was the diagnosis that the doctor had given. She had already made up her resolve when his illness was diagnosed. She already understood it.

But she just couldn't allow herself to leave her father in that nightmare for eternity. That alone she could never allow. That's why in these past two years Ayase had challenged Kuraudo, who had become the new master of the dojo, numerous times. To reclaim the dojo that her father risked his life to protect.

However, there was no way that Ayase would be able to win against Kuraudo, whom even Kaito couldn't beat. Ayase was put down numerous times by Kuraudo who treated her like a kitten that was trying to play with a lion.

At first, he was having fun showing his comrades the sight of a pitiful woman who was desperately trying to defeat him. Maybe he got bored of it, but recently she was being turned down without being given a chance to face him. Now, the only way to fight him was for her to appear in the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival, and beat Kuraudo who would appear there, too.

Ayase and Kuraudo were both third years now. The limit of Kaito's life was approaching. The coming Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival would be her last chance. If she lost, her father's soul would forever be caught in the darkness of despair. She couldn't forgive that.

Then the only choice left was to use any means necessary to win. To get results. She would prioritize that above anything else. The means did not matter. She didn't think it was the right thing to do, but by no means was she wrong either. If the weak wanted to win against the strong, then he or she did not have the luxury to choose his or her ways. That was the reality.

"I will reclaim the dojo at all costs. Even if Kurogane-kun never forgives me."

...Then, finally, she could say to her father, who was wandering deep inside the despair, that it was fine now, and he didn't have to apologize anymore.

Once more, Ayase recalled everything and settled her feelings. She would no longer waver. She would no longer hesitate. Even if she couldn't boast to anyone.

She would win at any cost, and get the dojo back, because that was everything to Ayatsuji Ayase.

Part 4

"Thank you for waiting! It's time, so we will be starting the first match in the sixth training arena! I, Isogai of the Broadcasting Club, along with Oreki Yuuri, a homeroom teacher of the first year, will be your commentators for this match! Oreki-sensei, you seem to be in a good condition today!"

"It's because it's still the first match~ I will become the same ol' Yuuri that everyone loves when we get to around the third or so match~ ♪ But, it's still good. I've got about a liter of blood in reserve~"

"I see! It seems there will be a rain of blood in the broadcasting corner again! Well then, everyone, we will carry out the awaited introductions of the participants!"

The female student of the Broadcasting Club began introducing the first player.

"First, in the blue corner, with his perfect games; having won ten out of ten matches, and the one who is now the center of attention, the F-Rank knight, Kurogane Ikki!"

The audience burst into cheers the moment Ikki showed up in the stadium. The fans who came to cheer the Failure Knight on were female students.

"The stadium got filled with shouts the moment he showed up! He has amazing popularity!"

"Kurogane-kun has lots of female fans—"

"Even though he is so strong despite being a F-Rank, it feels like he isn't being rewarded!"

"Does Sensei understand this feeling?"

"A little while ago no one took notice of him, and he was just a nobody who had repeated the same year, but after the changes in Hagun's system, he stood out after displaying his ability in actual combat and weaponry. Now, the Failure Knight is considered to be one possible candidate for the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival! What kind of fight will he show us today!? And, today the one facing him has appeared in the red corner! With the same splendid record of ten wins out of ten matches, and wishing for her eleventh victory, the D-Rank third year knight, Ayatsuji Ayase!"

After Ikki, Ayase appeared, her black hair fluttering.

"For some strange reason she is also from a house that practices the art of the sword, which is very rare these days, like the contender Kurogane. They both had won their every match with sword techniques. From the information provided by Kagami-san from the Wall Newspaper Club it seems that she is actually a disciple of contender Kurogane who had been giving her lectures! In other words, today's match is between a master and his disciple! Will the disciple be able to overcome her strong master!?"

"*Cough* This will become a critical moment for Ayatsuji-san."

"Yes. Unlike contender Kurogane who had fought off competitors like the Hunter and Runner's High, contender Ayatsuji had won against lower E-Rank knights. Realistically speaking she was extremely lucky to have continually won ten matches."

"What kind of Blazer is she~?"

"We have little to no information regarding contender Ayatsuji. We don't have any data because she didn't participate in last year's competitive matches even once, and like I said before, she had won her matches with sword skills alone this year. That is why we don't know what kind of ability she is hiding up her sleeves! The existence of the trump card that contender Ayatsuji is hiding will increase the excitement of this match! Well then, both of them are now on the starting line!"

The two of them faced each other with a distance of twenty meters between them in the middle of the ring that was about a hundred meters long. Like it had been announced a little while ago, both of them were comrades who had practiced the sword and had spent time together. But, at present, there was no longer such a relationship between them.

…Such a scary face.

Ayase thought, looking at Ikki's expression. She had never seen such a strict and grim expression on Ikki's face before. He was mad. At Ayase who had dirtied herself with a conduct called foul play that a martial artist should never lay his hands on.

But Ayase didn't feel sorry. Because she had already decided to walk down this path.

Rather… this is more convenient.

Ikki's mana had not completely recovered because of Ayase's preparations. He should not be able to use Ittou Shura anymore. On top of that, Ikki was clearly straining himself. That was not his usual posture, she could easily see that.

Anger robbed his composure, and lack of composure always connected to the decline of potential. Since the difference between them was obvious, she had to remove whatever was removable from Ikki's fighting power. That is why, this could be said to be a pleasant byproduct of her actions.

Furthermore… Ayase had a trap that could very well be called a trump card. She had already prepared it at dawn before the face off with Ikki.

Now that he has lost his composure, he might just jump into that trap.

"Now then, Everyone, please cheer them on! MATCH START!"

Part 5

The moment the buzzer to start the match was hit—

"—!"

With the reaction speed of a sprinter, the swordsman with the black katana rushed towards Ayase. Bending his body low, a sprint like a gale that used his entire body's springs and not just leg strength. It was a complete surprise attack, raising the curtains of the match.

Ayase, who hadn't yet taken a good hold on the red Japanese sword *Hizume*, would not be able to counter it.

But, that was only if they were just swordsmen. The two of them were Blazers!

"You fell for it!"

Along with her voice, Ayase's device *Hizume* released a red light, resembling fresh blood, from the blade of her sword.

—Blood flew from Ikki's entire body.

"Guhh, ahhhhh!"

Ikki fell while shouting in pain. Upon examination, Ikki's entire body was covered in wounds made by long slashes.

"Wh, wha wha wha what was that just nowwwwww!? Suddenly contender Kurogane's body has been hacked up! Just what the heck happened!?"

"What!? What happened!? There is blood coming out of the Failure

Knight!"

The audience was stirred by the sudden turn of events. No one understood what happened in that moment.

However, only a Blazer can do something like slice-and-dice an opponent who was far away. That was the ability of Ayatsuji Ayase's Device *Hizume*.

My ability is to open the wounds given by the blade of Hizume.

By manipulating the wounds given by her sword at will, her ability allowed her to make any kind of small wound into a fatal one. In other words it was an ability to deepen vital wounds.

However, this was only when it was used on humans. Her ability could also be used on the atmosphere. By manipulating the parts of the atmosphere that were cut by the blade of *Hizume* she could instantly, or after a certain time, create blades of vacuum.

That was her Noble Art, *Mark of the Wind*.

Before dawn, and before she went to meet with Ikki, Ayase had come to this sixth training arena, which was to become the stage for her match, and laid down the land mines of slashes by cutting up the entire ring with *Hizume*.

I've laid out more than a hundred of these marks all over the ring. Even if Kurogane-kun is a master in seeing through things, there is no way even he can defend against attacks that can't be seen! In reality, he just easily fell for one of my traps.

Of course, this was against the rules. It wouldn't be a problem if she marked around during the match, but it was completely against the rules to set up traps on the stage before the match had even begin.

But, because the kamaitachi couldn't be seen, it was hard to notice the trick. She was worried that Oreki, who was a mage knight, might be able to see through it. But Oreki still hadn't called off the match due to foul play. Then—

I can do this!

She had outwitted Oreki. Ayase certainly felt the attack hit.

The vacuum blades created by *Mark of the Wind was a byproduct of conceptual magic. Honestly, it lacked the power to kill the opponent, and thus was not a decisive move. But a slash of* Hizume *was a different story. With Ayase's ability, the match would be decided if Ikki received even a scratch from the blade of* Hizume*, because she could make any kind of wound, no matter how small it was, and open up and tear the flesh until the bone to make it fatal.*

In other words, Ayase's goal was to corner Ikki with *Mark of the Wind* and then slash him once with *Hizume*.

If I can do that, then I'll be able to win.

The problem was, when could she charge in to deliver the wound?

Ikki was no average swordsman. Ayase understood it the best due to directly taking classes from him. If she made one wrong move, she would be defeated instead. She had given him some damage with that surprise attack, but that didn't make him fall down, it only stopped his charge. He still had his guard up to at least fend off attacks even while he was wounded.

…That's why, it's too early. It can't be helped, and his actions would mean only one thing if Kurogane-kun doesn't charge at me now.

His charge had been stopped, and in return it ended up with him receiving heavy wounds. There was a breather for a while to reconfirm his emotions and posture. Then—

"Oh, contender Kurogane took a step back! Has he decided to retreat and reconfirm the situation before the unknown slash!?"

I'll aim for that!

"Gahhhh!?"

"Ahh!? How could this be? Contender Kurogane was slashed from behind this time! What is going on in that ring!?"

Ayase had created a prison out of slashes. There was nowhere to run. Ikki finally fell to his knees after suddenly being slashed from behind.

A complete opening, and that was for Ayase—

A once in a lifetime chance!!!

She would end it here; with that in mind, Ayase rushed forth towards Ikki.

"Contender Ayatsuji takes the offense the moment Contender Kurogane fell to his knees! This is bad! He won't be able to demonstrate his prized sword technique in that position!"

Ayase had the choice to drag out the battle since she had created the prison of slashes, but she was afraid.

Kurogane-kun was able to beat even that Hunter.

And he didn't just beat him. The important thing here was the fact that he managed to beat Hunter after receiving all of his attacks and even broke that famous Area Invisible.

In that fight Ikki was not able to see Hunter until the very end. Despite that, the Worst One still caught Hunter and defeated him. Ikki had frightening insight. With that it wouldn't be odd for him to trace Ayase's thoughts back and see through the places that had *Marks of the Wind.*

She wouldn't think about it if it was someone ordinary, but Kurogane Ikki just might do it. Even if she dragged out the match and chipped his stamina off little by little, it'd be bad if he managed to recover mentally during that.

The frightening part about the Worst One wasn't his physical strength but his mental power that supported his insight.

That's why—I'll charge in now! It'd be fine if I just hurt him a bit! The match would be decided with just that!

"Haaaaaaa!!!"

"And contender Ayatsuji fiercely attacks! Rush, rush, ruuuuush! She is raining down slashes by the scarlet blade at contender Kurogane, who is on his knees! Is blocking the attacks in that unstable position the best contender Kurogane can do!? Will he get sliced by the rain of slashes just like that!? …No!? Wh-What a thing! Contender Kurogane is completely defending against the rain of red slashes despite being at a disadvantage and in an unstable position with the blade of *Intetsu*! He is not letting even a single slash from the blade which keeps falling down on him from above pass!"

…*Kuh…!*

She couldn't reach him. Even though all she needed to do was scratch him a little bit, that little bit seemed so far away. Ayase was astonished at Ikki who was, despite being in a disadvantaged position, blocking all of her attacks by using techniques that relied on the wrists alone.

As expected… of the knight who was even called the Crownless Sword King by some. He wouldn't let her win easily. Moreover, Ikki stood up while blocking the rain of slashes.

"Haa!"

"Contender Kurogane, while blocking the sword strikes from his opponent in that position, stands up and finally counterattacks!"

He launched a wide and big slash to her head.

It wasn't Ikki's style to strike with power alone, but that was all a part of his plan.

—This was not a counterattack like the commentator had said.

Even if he was able to make a comeback, the rhythm that was lost because of receiving the attacks in that disadvantageous position wouldn't come back so simply. Ikki wished to create some distance, thus the wide swing. If his opponent dodged, it would obviously increase the distance between them, and even if the opponent received the attack it would still shake her off because of the power of the strike and distance would be created between them.

It'd be advantageous for Ikki no matter which of the two she chose. It was an attack with a plan behind it. However, Ayase had read that plan of his!

Here!

She read his movements and understood that this was a chance to win. Ayase's Ayatsuji single-blade style was a school that specialized in the counter by deflection.

It is normally impossible for someone of my level to actually counter a strike from a serious Kurogane-kun.

Ikki's swordsmanship was too agile. If she recklessly tried to make a move, she would be the one getting burned.

But this strike from above was a different matter altogether.

This intimidating strike was just to gain some distance from a glued opponent. Though it was violent and rough it didn't have that agility and sharpness.

If it was this strike, then even I can counter it.

She decided it in an instant. Ayase readied *Hizume* and slid the hammer-like strike outside. Simultaneously, Ayase put strength into her leg and moved her body forward, aiming for a counter. She passed by Ikki whose upper body was afloat and swung *Hizume* aiming for the torso.

I got him!

Ayase gained definite confidence in her judgment.

But—rather than getting the sensation of cutting abdominal flesh, what she felt was the resistance of having hit something hard.

He was able to guard it! Why!

Even though she had slid his blade to the side, how was he able to guard in that timing?

The answer lay in Ikki's hand.

He blocked Ayase's counter strike with *Intetsu*'s hilt.

"Oooooooo! The moment when we thought he was countered, contender Kurogane blocked the counter with the hilt of his sword! What an amazing trick play!"

"Kurogane-kun used the same guard in his mock battle with Stella-chan. Guarding attacks, which couldn't be guarded with the blade, with the hilt. A defense that uses both the blade and the hilt, as always the cross range is impregnable."

…Kuh! Now that I think about it, Kurogane-kun was able to guard in this strange manner, too…!

Upon Oreki's explanation, Ayase clicked her tongue. What amazing power of concentration. But why is he able to maintain such concentration? Even though he had lost his composure—

"—!?"

Thinking about it, Ayase, who looked at Ikki's expression, was stunned.

His expression didn't contain even an atom of anger or impatience that he showed before. Ikki had regained his composure. He was looking over at Ayase with eyes so tranquil that it reminded one of a fountain that didn't create even a single ripple.

It can't be…. I was lured in…!?

Ayase reacted immediately to chills she felt on her back. She kicked off the ground and gained a considerable amount of distance from Ikki's attack zone. She was on guard thinking an attack from him would follow, but Ikki didn't chase her. Ayase was just standing still in one place but there were no attacks that followed her. She thought she was either under a misunderstanding or maybe she was being excessively cautious.

Either way, it's back to square one.

There were still many traps left. She didn't wish for a prolonged battle but it would be meaningless if she went for a decisive battle only to get bitten herself.

As she had thought, she had to be more careful next—

"...I am glad."

In that moment, the samurai with the black katana, who was her opponent, sighed as though he was relieved at something.

"Eh?"

Glad? About what? That she opened up distance between them? Ayase was trying to think hard about the meaning of those words.

"As I expected, Ayatsuji-san is a person just like how I imagined you to be."

Her thoughts froze before Ikki's smile that was filled with happiness.

Part 6

There was a woman who wore a gentle smile upon hearing Ikki's words. She was his homeroom teacher, and she was one of the commentators and supervisors of this match. It was Oreki Yuuri.

This morning she was listening to Ikki for his reasons for damaging school property as his homeroom teacher.

"Sensei, in my match today, which Sensei will be supervising, my opponent will undoubtedly cheat."

"BU——!!!"

Oreki spurted out coffee and her nose started bleeding upon the sudden revelation.

"Wh, eh!? I'll stop my nosebleed; meanwhile, please explain yourself!"

There, Oreki heard all about the incident between Ayase and Ikki, which occurred last night. That Ayase called Ikki out. After calling him out, how she jumped down from the roof to reduce Ikki's strength. About how he broke the school building using his ability to save her.

"Su-Such a thing happened…?"

If this story was true then it would be a red card. Expulsion would be bit far-fetched, but this act would definitely remove her from matches.

"Bu-But how do you know that she will cheat in the match?"

"…When she severed the fence she was not doing anything, but I definitely heard the sound of a long sword in that moment. By deducing from that, though I don't know the exact mechanism behind it, I think Ayatsuji-san's ability is positioning slashes at various places, which can be fired off randomly. If she has that kind of ability then it won't be a mistake to assume that she has probably placed traps all over the sixth training ground where the match is going to take place today. After all, she tried to fake a suicide to kill my trump card, and for sure, she will use any means necessary to defeat me in the match."

"Well of course, for someone who did such a thing, I don't think she will use fair play in the essential match.... Mu mu mu~ but attempted suicide and obstruction... those are, in fact, big problems you know."

"But, with just my testimony it won't count as proof, right?"

"Yeah. Sensei trusts Kurogane-kun, but due to my own circumstances I won't be able to move with just a testimony. But, I got the big picture. Sensei will be on the lookout, too. If I find any signs of foul play I'll stop the match immediately. So you can relax now, Kurogane-kun."

"No, please don't call off the match for foul play."

Blood gushed out from Oreki's nose again. Oreki, while feeling anemic and extremely dizzy, blocked her nose with tissue and asked Ikki.

"Eh? What, what do you mean? I completely don't understand what you're saying!? Then, why did you tell me about this here and now?"

"If you asked me about the reason why I broke the school building, I'd have no choice but to tell you. Furthermore, even if Oreki-sensei didn't hear this from me you would have probably noticed Ayatsuji-san's foul play, and when you did, you would stop the match immediately. But… I don't want you to stop the match."

"Why!? If foul play really does occur, then Kurogane-kun will win by default due to Ayatsuji-san's forfeit. You do understand how important it is to win just a single match in this representative selection contest, don't you?"

"Yes, I do. If I don't remain undefeated, I probably won't be selected as a representative."

"Yes, to be blunt, from your current development, if you don't attain a complete victory you won't be selected as the representative. You understand that, and yet you wish for me not to call off the match for foul play?"

"Yes, please don't, Sensei."

Oreki couldn't comprehend it, because Ikki should be craving for victory more than anyone. Oreki knew Ikki from the time when he took his entrance exam, since she was the one responsible for his entrance exam. She had never seen a student with as strong a determination and sense of purpose as Ikki's.

Oreki was greatly saddened because someone like him had wasted an entire year because of the irrationality of the world of adults. Then, the school system had changed and he had finally gotten an equal chance this year. He should want to win even if he had to use underhanded methods. Despite that, why was he lowering his head for someone who broke the ultimate taboo as a knight against him?

"...Won't you tell me the reason?"

"Because I want to believe."

"...You want to believe?"

"Yes.... I had always been thinking from the time I met her during midnight. As a friend told me, if I cut my ties with her here and now, I'll surely win the match due to her foul play. But would that really be alright? I thought again and again but I couldn't find an answer... but I understood one thing clearly."

"What is it?"

"My feeling that I don't want to cut ties with her…. That is why I thought I will believe until the very end that Ayatsuji-san has been cornered by something and due to that she has lost sight of herself."

Ikki knew. Whenever she got closer to her father's sword by a slight margin she would merry around happily like a small child. Ikki knew that smile of Ayase. Ayase's words from her saying how she loved his hands which had roughened from wielding a shinai. He could not believe all of that was a lie.

"That's why I've decided. I would believe the usual Ayatsuji-san and not the one I saw last night."

When people are desperate they become blinder than they think, to the point where they lose sight of themselves. Ikki knew that because he had experienced it himself. And the only thing that could save people like that were words from someone they held dear.

That was why, if Ayase was like him who, at the time, was not able to hear the cries of his own heart due to being too desperate, then—

"I want to help her. That's why, Sensei, please allow me this last chance to confirm her true intentions."

…Good grief, there is no knight who will be able to refuse after hearing something like that.

Always be with justice. Be honest even against your enemy. An ideal self that everyone aiming to be knights dream about.

Oreki was the same, that is why she accepted Ikki's request. Of course she saw through Ayase's foul play at the first glance but she didn't call off the match., because she had decided to leave the match and the heart of the lone girl to him.

She would not interfere. Oreki silently watched over Ikki.

Do help her, your precious friend—

Part 7

To be frank, everything was in the palm of Ikki's hand from the start. He already knew there were traps set all over the ring. He had already seen through the fact that she did not want to prolong this battle. That was the reason Ikki jumped towards the slashes of his own free will to make her go on the offensive, aiming for a decisive battle.

All of that… was to talk with Ayase through clashing their swords.

I should have done this from the start.

Ikki smiled bitterly at his own foolishness.

Ah yes, that's right, there is no way a man like him, who couldn't even recognize the feelings of the one closest to him, his lover, for an entire month, could ever understand Ayase with words alone. In the end, he only had the sword. He could only understand the true feelings of other people through the sword.

But, now, with certainty, Ikki saw Ayase's true feelings.

"I am glad…. As I expected, Ayatsuji-san is how I imagined you to be."

"…What do you mean?"

"I meant, Ayatsuji-san was not someone who could act like nothing happened after doing something wrong."

"…I was wondering what you'd say… ahahaha. After being beaten to a pulp, you sure have some nerve to say such nonsense. Isn't this a bit too much? No matter what, aren't you being too much of a nice guy?"

Ayase glared into Ikki's eyes, talking and scorning in the same manner as she did last night on the rooftop. But—

"It's not nonsense."

Ikki wouldn't be deceived by that false expression anymore, because swords didn't lie.

"Your sword play, steps, rhythm, breathing, every single thing is messed up. Forget about what I taught you, you aren't even able to perform what you already knew from before. Even the execution of a counter, which is your specialty, is shaky. That's why it was parried with such ease. You can't deceive your soul no matter how much you try to make yourself look bad in your head. Swordsmanship is made up of heart, technique, and body. There won't be any real power in a sword if your heart wavers.... Ayatsuji-san, you're a proud person, more so than you think yourself."

"I-It's nothing like that!"

Upon Ikki's deduction, Ayase suddenly raised the volume in her voice.

"I am not wavering! I experienced it two years ago! It doesn't matter how proudly you fight. If you lose, everything will be over! There is no meaning in mere pretty words that won't bring any results! Because you can't protect if you don't win! That's why I'll use any means necessary to win! No matter what methods I have to use I'll win, and take everything back!"

Rather than being a rebuttal against Ikki, those were words meant to persuade herself. Ikki understood that. By becoming that desperate she was closing her ears to the scream of her heart. Just like his past self.

"...Then, there is only one thing left for me to do."

That was to let her hear the scream of her own heart. That was the only thing to do now. That's why Ikki pointed the tip of *Intetsu* towards Ayase.

"With my weakest I'll make you regain your pride."

So he declared.

Part 8

"Ooh! Contender Kurogane lowered his upper body! Just like in the beginning, it's the attack stance! Even after receiving those mysterious slashes there is no sign of nervousness on his face! The Worst One plans on attacking! It can't be that he already saw through the mysterious slashes!?"

Ayase immediately reacted to that action. She stepped back to further the distance. Her reaction had composure, but her mind was greatly discomposed.

I am in the wrong!? Scream of my heart!?

What kind of blabber is that? There is no way such a thing is possible.

No matter what I have to do, I just have to take back the dojo to relieve Father!

She was not wavering, nor trying to deceive herself. Ikki was just trying to lead her astray. Ayase strongly persuaded herself with those words and tried to avoid thinking deeply.

—If you say that much, then very well, I'll end this match with the same mistake you talked about!

The distance she had created by back-stepping was thirty meters. And in between was the minefield of slashes. She had completely memorized the speed of Ikki's charge in the beginning. Next time she'd be able to activate *Mark of the Wind* with more lethal timing!

"Here I come, Ayatsuji-san."

In that instant, Ikki raised his upper body and ran forward!

Here!

Upon that action, Ayase opened the wounds of *Mark of the Wind* that were in front of Ikki. The gap in the atmosphere that suddenly opened was the guillotine of vacuum that cut everything it touched. He wouldn't come out unscratched if it touched him. But—

"Wha—!?"

Kurogane Ikki's body rushed forward like a bullet, incomparable to the speed he showed in the beginning, and left Ayase's blade behind before the vacuum opened. —That super-speed was the same as Ittou Shura!

"What speed! Contender Kurogane finally uses his trump card Ittou Shura!"

Wh, why!? That trump card should have been sealed…!

Oreki's voice reached a baffled Ayase.

"Well, that is not Ittou Shura—"

"Eh? Is that true, Oreki-sensei?"

"That is just like everyone, he is only speeding mana emission."

Mana emission!

Ayase realized her mistake at those words.

Mana emission was to release one's mana to accelerate and enhance oneself. It was an enhancement technique that many other Blazers used unconsciously. Of course, Ayase used it as well.

"Kurogane-kun doesn't have much mana unlike other students, so if he uses it like this he will run out of mana after using it once or twice. That is why he doesn't use it normally. But, 'does not use it' is different from 'not being able to use it'. He probably, for some reason, can't use Ittou Shura this time. That's why I think he is using this as a replacement."

As Oreki had said, 'does not use it' is different from 'not being able to use it'. Normally Ikki 'does not use it' because he doesn't have much mana. But, now since the amount of mana required to use Ittou Shura will not recover in time, he doesn't have a reason not to use mana emission to enhance himself. That's why he used it. By releasing all of his existing mana, although only once, he was able to produce speed that was not inferior to Ittou Shura!

I was too concerned about Ittou Shura!

What a fatal mistake. Ikki had already stepped into a range where his sword can cut her by using just a single super-speed step.

Mark of the Wind wouldn't make it in time.

She was completely outwitted mentally.

However, this isn't the end!

He had broken into her range. She could not avoid a clash of swords. But only just once, she had to endure this clash with all she had and open the distance between them once more! Then, Ikki's mana would have run out. He wouldn't be able to perform a bullet-like start then.

My chance of winning exists there! I have to overcome this clash at all costs!

Ayase swung *Hizume* while screaming intensely, and slashed at Ikki who was before her eyes—

That blade slashed through empty air.

"—Eh…."

Ikki was, for sure, before her eyes—

Ayase's slash, which was swung with all her might, had only scratched the tip of Ikki's nose, while he was running towards her. It didn't reach him. Had she miscalculated the distance between them? No. Certainly, Ikki was within the range of her sword. But, that Ikki disappeared like a mirage, and another Ikki from behind him was running towards her.

Ayase blanked out. She could no longer understand what was going on. But that confusion was not meaningless. This was one of original techniques Kurogane Ikki possessed, a technique rivaling the seventh secret sword, Raikou. With radical footwork he creates an afterimage before himself while running to confuse the distance between him and his opponent.

"Fourth secret sword—*Shinkirou*[1]."

At that moment, the blade of *Intetsu* swung with all of his might slashed through air and Ayase.

Part 9

"It's overrrrr! Contender Kurogane's attack was a clean hit!"

Upon the voice, which dislodged from the accumulation of scenes, the audience, too, raised loud cheers.

"Contender Ayase has fallen to the ground! However she is not bleeding…! What is going on…?"

"*Cough, cough*…Yes, that is because he changed his device into Illusionary Form the moment before slashing her."

"Then, does that mean she only got exhausted and did not necessarily received a fatal blow?"

"Yes, that is correct."

"But why did he do such a thing? Does it mean that he does not want to hurt women?"

"That's not true. I was slashed by him in the past. Probably, from the start he was just aiming to tire her out… because this time around, wining is not Kurogane-kun's only goal."

Oreki whispered to herself, and looked down upon the ring.

The fallen Ayase was trying to get up by putting strength into her limbs. Ayase, while trembling, raised her head and glared at Ikki who was standing before her.

"…What are you… trying to do here…?"

"About what?"

"Don't play dumb… why are you not cutting me down…!?"

"I don't have to. Ayatsuji-san can't fight anymore."

Making fun of me…!

She was made light of. Thinking of that action as insult Ayase flexed her limbs. One does not receive any physical damage if she is cut by a Device in Illusionary Form. Only her stamina gets depleted. Ayase had confidence in her stamina, to the point where she can easily keep up with Ikki and Stella on their morning runs. A fatigue of this level did not mean anything to her.

"…Huh?"

That's how it should have been… but she could not feel any power in her body.

"…Why…?"

She had to stand up, she had to win this fight, or else everything will be over. She won't be able to save her father…. Why, why?

My heart… was it this cold?

Her heart wasn't stirring. She couldn't feel her fighting spirit to stand up once more by mustering the last of her strength.

Ayase realized upon feeling that fact. That her soul was rejecting such a fight which didn't have pride in it.

I see…. This is the scream of my heart….

When people were cornered, they were only able to stand back up because they have pride within their hearts. That they could still do it. That they should still do it. Not to give up. They encouraged themselves like that.

Ayase, too, had been doing so all along. No matter how hard the training was, no matter how much her hands got blistered, she was able to endure it all because she had pride in herself who wielded the sword of Ayatsuji.

But… for the Ayase who rejected that same pride….

"…It's just as Kurogane-kun said."

She no longer had the power to stand up.

"…It's my loss."

Part 10

"Wow, there is the surrender sign from contender Ayatsuji! The match ends with this~~! As expected, it was the Worst One, contender Kurogane, who won! With this, contender Kurogane has eleven consecutive wins! The eleven consecutive wins he earned by defeating famous people like Hunter and Runner's High! We can now say it with confidence that he will be a representative for the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival!"

Glancing over the excited cheers of the audience, Ayase let out a dry laugh.

"So uncool… forget about abandoning it, I couldn't even maintain it…."

The words that came out of her mouth were meant as a sneer at her own half-hearted self.

But, that sneer—

"You are not uncool."

Ikki rejected it strongly.

"Eh…?"

"You wandered, were mistaken, and in the end lost sight of yourself, but you had not thrown it away yet, and that is Ayatsuji-san's strength."

And Ikki asked while extending his hand to the fallen Ayase.

"Ayatsuji-san, please tell me… what was taken away from you by that Sword Eater? What was it that pushed you so far?"

"What do you plan to do after hearing something like that…."

"I'll get it back."

There was not even a bit of hesitation or falsehood in those words. If Ayase relied on him, Ikki would fight for her without any hesitation. She understood that, and precisely because she understood it that, she said—

"…I cannot tell you, because it doesn't have anything to do with Kurogane-kun after all."

She could not let him fight against such a monster. She could not let such a kind man get hurt because of someone half-hearted like herself.

Father is enough. I can't let such a thing happen to him too.

That was why Ayase was concealing everything. But—

"Then, I'll just investigate the matter."

"Eh?"

"I'll investigate everything by following you around and researching you."

"Wha, what are you saying…."

"I'll inquire about everything, and get everything back for you. Ayatsuji-san, too, stalked me before, so we'll be equal with this. Thus, I have no reason to listen to your complaints, do I?"

Incomprehensible. What "we'll be equal with this"…? This was not balancing debt, just increasing it.

"…Why…?"

Ayase couldn't stop the trembling in her voice, nor could she stop the miserable tears.

"Even though I betrayed Kurogane-kun…. Even though I did such horrible things…. Why… are you trying to help me?"

Ayase asked with a trembling voice. Ikki's answer was filled with clarity.

"I don't need a reason to wipe my friend's tears."

"…!"

For a moment Ikki's figure overlapped with Kaito's in Ayase's eyes. The figure of her father that climbed the stage of battle for the sake of his apprentice. Ikki was the same as him. Even if he was spat on or jeered on, he would not take out his sword for things trivial like those. But, if his precious comrades are hurt, he would not hesitate in the slightest to draw his sword.

Ah…. Yeah, that's how it was….

Since when had she lost sight of it? This, right here, was the figure she had been chasing so badly after in that dojo. Ayase looked at her own hands. They were blistered hands that couldn't be said to be pretty even as flattery. Just like her father and Ikki, they were the hands of a swordsman.

That's right, I just wanted to be a cool swordsman like Father. That's why I wielded the sword.

She was confronted by Kuraudo's violent strength just once, and lost the sight of herself in the impatience of trying get the dojo back. Where her pride was, Ayase had finally remembered that and squeezed her hands, strongly.

At that moment, Ayase's heart finally decided.

"…Kurogane-kun… please help me… !"

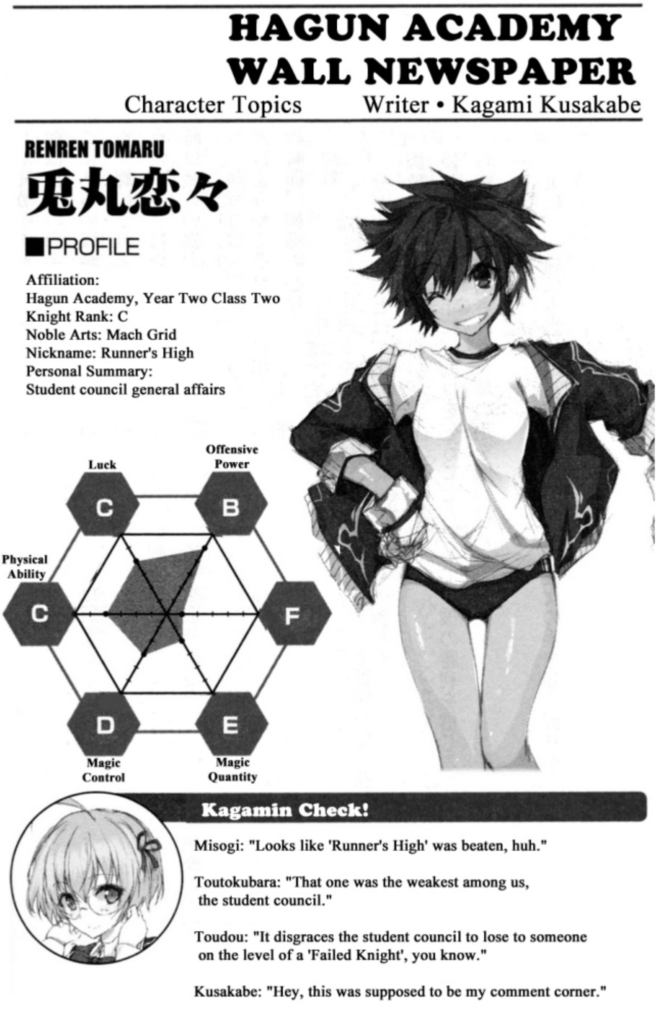
The thing she should do now was not to go against the teachings of her father, and betray her own pride and bask in self-pity like a damsel in distress. It was to ask this gentle yet strong boy for his help, and believe in his victory.

That's why Ayase took Ikki's extended hand.

"I just wanted to hear those words."

Upon those words, Ikki smiled like he was really happy and strongly gripped Ayase's hand.

Chapter 4: Decisive Battle <Failure Knight> VS <Sword Eater>


Luck
C
Offensive Power
B
Physical Ability
C
F
Magic Control
D
Magic Quantity
E

HAGUN ACADEMY WALL NEWSPAPER

Character Topics Writer • Kagami Kusakabe

RENREN TOMARU

兎丸恋々

■PROFILE

Affiliation:
Hagun Academy, Year Two Class Two
Knight Rank: C
Noble Arts: Mach Grid
Nickname: Runner's High
Personal Summary:
Student council general affairs

Kagamin Check!

Misogi: "Looks like 'Runner's High' was beaten, huh."

Toutokubara: "That one was the weakest among us, the student council."

Toudou: "It disgraces the student council to lose to someone on the level of a 'Failed Knight', you know."

Kusakabe: "Hey, this was supposed to be my comment corner."

Part 1

It was midnight of the day Ikki battled Ayase. A single silhouette could be seen in the forest clearing where Ikki usually trained. The silhouette swung a dimly glowing Katana under the moonlight.

A windless night, but the sound of the blade swaying in the wind could be heard. It was a beautiful form of training, as if dancing.

But that movement suddenly came to a stop.

"Stella?"

The silhouette… Kurogane Ikki turned towards the entrance of the recess while wiping his sweat and asked. He felt a presence there; as expected, a girl with glossy fire-blonde hair stood there. It was Stella Vermillion.

She frowned a bit, but asked frankly.

"You're still at it? If you're not careful then it's going to affect the battle tomorrow."

The battle Stella mentioned was a duel with Kuraudo. After Ikki's match with Ayase yesterday, Ikki and Stella heard everything from her. From the beginning till the end, and what happened two years ago.

How Ayatsuji Kaito, the Last Samurai had been beaten.

And after hearing everything, Ikki firmly promised Ayase that he would duel Kuraudo tomorrow betting the dojo. Tomorrow… a battle even harder than today's might be waiting. Then the wisest decision now would be to rest. Ikki also understood that, but he couldn't calm down.

"…Was it a shock?"

"Well, yeah… For me, Kaito-san might've been something like an idol."

For Ikki who was abandoned by the adults of the Kurogane house, people like Kaito were the same as a swordsmanship master for him. Watching their matches, he stole, analyzed, and practiced their techniques over and over again. It was something which became the foundation of the current Ikki. So hearing the past events from Ayase was a shock to him. Decayed by disease, in a match with no magic… in other words, in a match not between knights but swordsmen, he was one-sidedly beaten.

"As expected, Kurashiki-kun really isn't a pushover."

"Are you nervous?"

"…Yes, because he is such a tough opponent."

Kurashiki Kuraudo, the ace of Donrou Academy. A third year. He was in the best eight of the last festival. Information about a figure like him could be easily found if searched. His device was *Orochimaru*[2], a white saw blade with the ability to expand its length. It killed the meaning of distance. He could thrust at the opponent with bullet like speed even from a long distance, and if that was dodged he could still mow down the entire ring. If his opponent came in close range, he could shrink *Orochimaru* to a short sword and overwhelm his opponent with a rotating barrage.

Serpent Bone Blade, Kuraudo's Noble Art which had an absolute reach no matter what the distance was didn't have any blind spots. It wasn't a flashy move. But this simple move had an annoying amount of offensive power. The constant change in distance between the opponent was difficult to deal with for a swordsman like Ikki, who specialized in sword fights.

Thus he was called 'Sword Killer', and like the nickname stated, his ability was the natural enemy for swordsmen. And he beat Kaito. So Ikki had a feeling that Kuraudo had something else up his sleeve.

"But, that's something I understand."

Ever since he felt that barbaric aura with that savage expression of his at the restaurant. But that wasn't the reason Ikki couldn't calm down.

"...Stella. After you heard Ayatsuji-san's story, what did you think?"

"She got mixed up with a troublesome mutt, and I pity her."

"Is that all? I...."

"You don't have to say it."

Stella interrupted him and muttered.

"Probably, we're thinking the same thing. That's why you said it, didn't you?"

"Is that so.... Yeah, that's right. I knew Stella would understand."

Ikki's face lit up happily. He was happy that his lover was thinking the same thing as him.

"But whatever the truth is, it shouldn't concern Ikki, right? What you have to do hasn't changed."

"Yeah, that's right."

Nodding, Ikki once again swung his sword in the darkness.

...Body condition is fine. No problems with vitality either. All that's left is to wait. After tomorrow, everything will be clear.

—The truth that Ayase had yet to realize, the events that happened two years ago.

Part 2

On the evening of the next day, Ikki and Stella headed for the ex-Ayatsuji dojo grounds being guided by Ayase.

"This road, it brings back memories."

Ikki muttered while looking at the old familiar houses lined up.

"Come to think of it, didn't Kurogane-kun come challenging our dojo once?"

"Yeah. But I was turned away after being told they didn't do stuff like that anymore."

"That's from Ikki's middle school days, right? You went to many places and visited a lot of dojos."

"Might've been a mischievous side of me. When I could manage the time, I would go around the country and make challenges."

"That's a lot of willpower. But Kurogane-kun, wasn't it dangerous? A middle school student going around challenging dojos, weren't you ever beaten to a pulp because of that cheeky attitude?"

"There was that too. Sometimes I would get beaten from all directions by disciples until I'm half-dead. But it couldn't be helped since I did something rude like challenging their dojo. The challenger can't complain no matter what the challenged does to him, that's an ironclad rule."

That's right. He knew it was dangerous, and the number of times he was almost killed couldn't be counted with just his fingers. But at that time, he just wanted to become strong no matter what. Since the adults around him didn't help him at all, he wanted to experience everything, absorb everything, and gain all the strength he could.

But still, I didn't do stuff like attack the pupils and forcefully challenge the dojos when I was refused.

While reminiscing, the three left the highway and entered a vacant space mixed with groves of trees. Before them was a solitary house surrounded by long walls.

"This… was my home once."

But now, it was appropriate to call it an abandoned samurai mansion. The tiles were out of place, the wood supporting the gate rot and collapsed. The area around was littered with cigarette butts, snack boxes, poly-bags etc. The white walls now had tasteless and colorful graffiti.

"What tasteless scribbles. I've heard that there are people with awesome graffiti skills but this, this is totally a no."

"…I don't think that's where you should be surprised…. What a mess."

Ayase who guided them here had a pained expression, as if she was killing off the disappointment she was feeling. Her precious place was damaged to such an extent, of course she would.

I have to get it back.

Ikki resolved himself yet again, and took out a wooden sword from his bag.

"Kurogane-kun… may I ask, how are you going to get back the dojo?"

"Of course, I'll go straight in and challenge the dojo master. There's no other way right?"

After hearing what happened two years ago, Ikki thought that Kuraudo's way of doing things was surprisingly modest. Of course, attacking the students to get the right of challenging the dojo wasn't exactly modest, but in the end, everything was settled under a supervised duel both parties agreed to. In other words, both good and evil, truth and false, everything was entrusted to that duel. So a third party butting their nose in the results would be very rude. It's an insult towards Kaito.

"That's so like Ikki."

"I understand… But Kurogane-kun, please be careful. That man… Sword Killer is very strong. Certainly at that time my father was ill, but he was still strong enough that I and the other pupils couldn't even touch him. But he still lost…."

"I know. He's the ace of Donrou too. Not someone I can go easy against."

Ikki took a deep breath once.

"Then, let's go."

Resolving himself, he headed towards the gate of the ex-Ayatsuji dojo.

Before the now decaying and almost collapsed gate of the dojo, about five people, probably high school students in crude-looking garb were kneeling down and chatting in a crude manner. Among them, there was the skinhead they saw at the restaurant. Without a doubt, they were Kuraudo's lackeys.

"Pardon me, but could I have a moment of your time?"

"Huh?"

I wonder why these types of people start everything with a threat.

"…A-Ah! Aren't you that coward from the restaurant—!"

It seems like the skinhead remembered Ikki. He immediately recognized him.

"Eh? You mean that guy you talked about recently?"

"Yeah, yeah! That coward who couldn't say anything even after getting hit by Kuraudo, he could only shake!"

"HAHAHA! Looks weak too. He's wearing the Hagun uniform but is this guy really a Blazer!?"

"Nn? Rather isn't that Ayase-chan in the back… whoa! Who's that totally hot redhead chick!?"

One of the idle boys noticed Stella's presence and with a wrapped smile, he approached Stella.

On the other hand, Stella glared at him as if looking at a spineless insect. Red sparks started to appear in the air.

Ah, that's bad.

Before burnt corpse number one could be produced, Ikki grabbed the shoulder of the guy who was approaching. He was doing it out of goodwill, but the atmosphere around them suddenly changed abruptly.

"Hey! The hell's with the hand, mate?"

"I was trying to save you from dying here but, well hear me out. I've come to challenge Kurashiki-kun to a duel. Please guide me to where he is."

At that, their eyes all turned round for a moment,

""""HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHHA!!!""""

And they started an outburst of laughter.

"Hey hey hey, you serious! A duel!? A chicken like you? This is priceless!"

"In the first place you, do you even know what duel means?"

"Hihihi! Damn, this is too much~"

"Kukukukuh… Hey, bro. It's unfortunate but Kuraudo doesn't have the hobby of dueling small fry cowards like you. So why not fight us instead? If you beat us then we'll take ya to him—good deal, right?"

"Haha, fight fight! This's gonna be good."

Saying that, one of them materialized a Device that looked like an army knife and touched Ikki's cheeks with the flat while laughing.

At that provocation, Ikki….

Ah, so these guys are Donrou students huh….

—And so, since the circumstances favored him, he suddenly grabbed the thug's wrist.

"That's fine by me."

Crunch

He showed a smile that could almost be called heartless.

Part 3

"So, because that brown-haired asshole was too annoying, I ripped off his trousers and left him rolling on the main street."

"Gyahaha, seriously!"

"No way~ Kyahaha!"

In the ex-Ayatsuji dojo halls, some boys were sitting on the floor while chatting. The subjects of their chatter were the same as always. Who fought with who, who cheated who, who did it with who, and so on. Kuraudo wasn't really interested in all that so he sat alone at the sofa, away from his friends while smoking tobacco.

…These guys sure don't get tired talking about the same thing everyday.

They were colleagues who agreed with his view, but this was the only thing he didn't understand about them.

I'd rather take part in the selection matches they started in Donrou and Hagun.

Because then he could spend a more stimulating time. While sighing he released some smoke, and looked at it while it fumed towards the hole in the roof. The evening sky was peeking in. Now that he thought about it, it's become two years since he stole this dojo.

After all this time, maybe I should sell it.

As he was thinking while releasing tobacco smoke—

"Hey, Kuraudo."

"What? Got a stomachache or something?"

"...Do you remember the guys who you messed with in that restaurant recently? You know those two with Ayase-chan."

"Aah, what about them?"

"I thought I'd seen their faces before but yesterday, I suddenly remembered."

One of the guys showed Kuraudo his datapad. There was an article titled 『Mock Battle! A-Rank Knight 'Crimson Princess' Defeated by F-Rank Knight 'Worst One'!』 and some pointed-out links to the reference videos on the display. The reference videos were of course, that of Stella's and Ikki's mock battle.

"I heard from a friend at Hagun today that this guy even defeated that Runner's High! And one group gave him this exaggerated nickname, Crownless Sword King! Maybe... maybe we messed with someone really bothersome here...."

He was sweating with a blue face after learning the true identity of the person he messed with. But as for Kuraudo—

"...Haha."

After watching that video, he had a broad grin showing all thirty-two of his teeth.

"I see now. I thought he was only at the level of Ayase, but I didn't think he'd be this strong."

Kuraudo felt his internal temperature rise rapidly. Well, it couldn't be helped if his pent-up energy wanted to explode.

Interesting.

He wanted to postpone it till the festivals but, now it was better to just go to Hagun today. Or should he just use Ayase to get to him? While he was making that wicked plan—

"...Ah?"

Kuraudo heard the footsteps that were nearing the dojo hall while treading the soil. It was quite the clean sound; by clean, meaning that the posture of walking was correct. Among his companions here, there wasn't anyone who could do that.

"Haha. Hey hey, now this is interesting."

"Eh? Kuraudo, what are you...."

For a moment, the footsteps stopped in front of the door. Then it was opened quite forcefully. The guests that came were just as Kuraudo expected. Kurogane Ikki, Stella Vermillion, and Ayatsuji Ayase, the three from the restaurant.

"Pardon us."

"Uwah! What a mess. I'm surprised you guys could live in this trashcan."

"W-Who the hell are you!"

"Wait, from the restaurant...!"

His companions were restless at the unexpected guests but Kuraudo just sat on the sofa like always and glared at Ikki, who had a wooden sword in one hand and a vinyl bag in the other.

"...What a coincidence. I was just thinking of going to your place."

"Is that so? Thank goodness we didn't miss each other."

Ikki was completely relaxed even though he was in enemy territory. He has guts.

"So, why'd ya come coward?"

"I don't think your stupid enough to not know what I want after seeing all this but... I'm here as a substitute. In place of Ayatsuji-san, I'll be taking the dojo back."

"Haha! I was wondering what you'd say, but laame~! I don't know what that woman brainwashed you with, but this dojo is something I got with a fair and square duel. If you're a swordsman, then of course you know what that means right?"

"Of course. —That's why, I won't tell you to just return it."

Saying that, he approached the sofa.

"Kurashiki-kun, I'm challenging you to a duel."

He thrust the wooden sword right in front of Kuraudo's nose.

"Dojo challenge, huh?"

"The same method as Kurashiki-kun. You're not thinking of running away are you?"

Oh? So he's gonna provoke me too, huh?

He was almost a different person from when they first met. But it doesn't matter why he had a change of heart… since it's interesting.

Kuraudo grabbed the sword tip in front of his nose.

"Haha. A'right. I'll accept it."

With his grip, he smashed the wooden sword.

"However, it'll be the same as how I did it. You're going to have to fight all these thirty idiots alone before you get to fight me. Start from there."

"I don't mind. The girls are here just to watch. When challenging a dojo, I have to abide by the dojo master's rules. Because that's the proper manner of doing it."

"Seems like you know a dojo challenger's etiquette huh. Fine, wait a bit. I'll go call the guys."

Kuraudo accessed the cell phone feature in his handbook to call the guys outside but—

"No, there's no need for that."

"Huh?"

"I thought you'd say that, so I already finished all that up before coming here."

Saying that, he turned the vinyl bag he had upside down. Donrou Academy student datapads starting falling down on the floor while making noises. And among them, one started to ring. That one was, in fact, the recipient Kuraudo just called.

"All that's left are the seven people here."

Showing his trophies, he made a bold smile at Kuraudo as if taunting him.

"T-This bastard! Riding on his luck!"

"Kill him—!"

After learning that their companions had been done in, the seven thugs there started to materialize their Devices one after another.

But Kuraudo halted them and—

"You guys get down."

"Kuraudo?"

"Th-There's no need to be scared! Let's gang up on him and kick his ass!"

"Settle down. —You're in the way."

"Hii—!"

His companions gulped and paled. They were pressured by the mad danger dwelling in Kuraudo's eyes.

I see, even if these guys all attack at the same time, it won't even be sport for him.

Then that'll just be a waste of time.

"A change of rules. The duel will be between you and me, a fight with real weapons. The one to die loses."

Declaring that, Kuraudo took out his Device, the white nodachi *Orochimaru*.

Generally, it was forbidden for student knights to use their abilities out of school. But there were a few exceptions. One, when they were mixed up in some sort of incident. And also, in a private dojo if the dojo owner permitted it. Now was the latter case. And Ikki had no reason to refuse.

"You have my gratitude for accepting, Sword Eater."

Replying, Ikki also materialized his *Intetsu* and got into stance. For a moment, Kuraudo felt all the hair on his body standing up with a chill.

—He understood, this was the real deal. This feeling, he hadn't felt it since the Last Samurai.

Swordsmen really are the best. The tension while facing them is on another level than fighting some random idiot.

A piercing gaze. A dully shining blade tip. Everything, as if hollowing out his insides. A welling up tension that couldn't be helped. This kind of feeling, he couldn't get enough of that even in the Festival.

Kuraudo cast everything out at that stimulation, and—

"Now then, let's go!!!"

With that rage, he slashed at Ikki.

Part 4

First off, Kuraudo dashed ahead which immediately killed the distance. He kicked the floor with his magically fortified legs and drew near Ikki.

"Haha!"

A flash of iron. He swung his nodachi with its saw blade with his right hand which ripped through the wind. He was full of defects and openings. A very crude and sloppy way of handling a sword. It was quite easy to defend. However, though he didn't have the basic knowledge on how to handle a nodachi, he swung it with a flash with only his arm strength alone!

Rather than slashing, it looked more like he was mowing it down.

A sloppy motion, but why's the swing so sharp!?

Once, twice, thrice. *Intetsu* which continued to block the hits started to creak. Ikki's arms screamed in pain. Even his ankles felt like they were jabbed.

What ridiculous power! As if he was a beast. His swings were like a wild beast baring his fangs. No logic, no theory, no smarts, he overpowered men with his brute strength alone!

But that kind of arm movement will completely unbalance him and his recovery will be late!

After receiving the attack for about three times, Ikki carried his body backward with his legs and attacked Kuraudo's flank. A loud burst of sound, a pressure passed by the tip of his nose. Kuraudo who swung the nodachi with one hand had his chest area wide open.

There—!

The reason he dodged the swing by a hair's breadth was for the counterattack. Ikki attacked Kuraudo not intending to let the chance escape. But—the skull tattoo on Kuraudo's chest looked as if it was laughing at that careful counter.

"—!?"

What Ikki's hands felt was a steel response. A steel blade stopped Ikki's perfectly timed counter.

"Haha, too bad."

The beast laughed, sticking out his tongue. Certainly, it was regrettable. Ikki's timing was perfect. To be able to block it even with that timing, it's not something possible by normal human reflexes.

Unless he predicted his counter and planned to guard from beginning.

…No that's not it…. It couldn't be that he…! But that's….

Suddenly, an extremely dangerous possibility popped up in Ikki's mind.

"Ha! Haha-!"

But he didn't have the time for deep thoughts. Kuraudo pushed back Ikki along with *Intetsu* with only a one-handed push with the nodachi.

With that, the battle distance changed from that of a sword's to a spear's. None of their swords would reach. Was he resetting the distance?

No, wrong.

"Chase and kill, *Orochimaru*!"

It was still within the reach of *Orochimaru*. Kuraudo's nodachi extended like a snake and chased after Ikki with the intent to kill.

"...!"

Ikki reflexively blocked with *Intetsu* but—

"HAHA! I'm not done yet!"

Kuraudo's attack had not ended yet. His nodachi immediately shrank and then he used it like a whip to slash at Ikki, again extending the blade. Right now, their distance was one where only Sword Eater's attacks would reach, a one-sided battle. Ikki had no choice but to take a defensive stance in front of those attacks.

"Kuh!"

Ikki's black blade was chipped off little by little while raising sparks against the long distance attacks of the white saw blade.

His arms were also giving off at those long distance attacks.

"Yeah! Do it Kuraudo—!"

"Turn him into a pile of dirt!"

Kuraudo's audience who cheered when he took the upper hand. On the other hand, Ayase who was on Ikki's side had a paled face.

"At this rate your guard will be broken! Kurogane-kun, take some distance!"

"That's useless. If Ikki moves back then that nodachi will just expand that much to adapt with it so there's no meaning in widening the distance. Rather, that would be more disadvantageous for him."

"Kuh, that means the situation can only worsen?"

"Yes. However... Ikki isn't the type of guy to sit by idly while that happens!"

The Crimson Princess who strongly promised this had hit the mark.

Of course, since she was the woman who knew the Worst One the best.

Ikki who was only defending with that wide gap suddenly leaned forward. Using his feet, he pushed his entire body ahead. Of course Kuraudo wouldn't let that happen so easily. This distance was perfect for him, a one-sided battle where Ikki couldn't attack. So he swung his sword again to protect that distance.

A white snake sliced the wind while chasing after Ikki. It was the howl to break open Ikki's cranium. But Ikki leaned even more forward. A dash! Only made possible by Ikki since he has a trained body.

Ikki nimbly avoided the blade, and dashed towards the opponent he had come to defeat.

"He did it…!"

Ayase who saw that splendid evasion shook her fist. But—

"Haha!"

But Sword Eater wasn't someone so soft that he'd let his opponent approach him just because his attack was evaded. *Orochimaru* which had lost its target for a moment turned its sharp snake head around as if possessing a will, and once again attacked towards Ikki's exposed back.

"T-That sword can also do that!?"

Ayase shouted.

Orochimaru's true value wasn't its ability to extend its length but the fact that it could move like its master ordered. As if the blade had a mind of its own, it changed its direction and chased after Ikki. After acknowledging that Ikki dodged it, *Orochimaru* turned its blade towards his back. As a result, Ikki wouldn't be able to escape being skewered!

"Aa, if it was Kurashiki-kun, I thought you would do that."

But there was just one opening.

"Wha—!"

Ikki did a sidestep with minimum movement and dodged the blade chasing after him.

That's right, Ikki wasn't just fighting defensively. He wasn't that submissive of a person. There would definitely be a deeper scheme in his battles. When he was dodging Kuraudo's attacks by a narrow margin, he was actually analyzing and sealing Kuraudo's movement, action, and combination patterns, all the while disclosing the roots of the person called Kurashiki Kuraudo.

Perfect Vision.

The power of the Worst One that even caught the invisible Hunter. The power to read the actions of a beast and with that knowledge, return a perfect counter attack. The counter he released after reading Kuraudo's attacks was the fastest possible attack by a Japanese sword—a thrust.

An attack aiming to gouge out the eyes of the skull under that uniform. Kuraudo was also full of openings with that surprise attack. There was no way he could turn his sword around nor evade the upcoming attack at this point. That wasn't something a human could possible do.

Thus bull's eye. Ikki's attack hit Kuraudo's chest!

That was supposed to happen. But just before it hit, the skull in front of Ikki's eyes suddenly vanished.

…*Huh!?*

What happened? For him to lose sight of his target with that timing? He could not understand. Did he just lose sight of Kuraudo like the mist?

No, that's not it. Ikki's senses immediately rang out in a frenzied alarm. It almost hurt.

Danger, Danger, DANGER, DANGER—!

....He ducked!

Just before the attack hit, Kuraudo bent his upper body back so much that it was almost parallel with the floor, and thus he dodged the attack. As if he was mocking *Intetsu* from directly below it, he looked up and....

"Ha—HA!"

He attacked Ikki with *Orochimaru.*

"Ugh—!"

Ikki blocked it with *Intetsu* just before it slashed his neck. Because the attack was very heavy, his shoulder got dislocated, but he didn't let the attack through. His expression also became bad. But the reason for that wasn't his disadvantageous position or the power of the attack.

As I thought... this guy...!

Kuraudo stood up straight with the momentum of that attack, and once again began his barrage.

Ikki's breathing was a mess compared to when he was just dodging a moment ago. He couldn't afford to go too far here. He raised *Intetsu* up in order to block the down coming nodachi.

But the moment their blades should've crossed—with a haze, Kuraudo's nodachi disappeared.

This—

—This is bad!

Ikki, even though he was kind of roughed up already, threw his body backwards with all his strength. Right at that moment, a flash appeared at the space Ikki was just in. The air was torn apart.

"!"

Because he suddenly jumped backwards, his stance was completely broken but he managed to get a foothold and regain his balance. Ayase and Stella who were watching their exchange just now halted their breathing.

Ikki's uniform—at the abdomen area, there was a huge slit. It meant that if Ikki hadn't jumped back just now, they would have been seeing his entrails spilling out.

"Haha! Good job dodging that just now."

"...Wha-What was... that...!?"

"Kurogane-kun!"

"Yeaaaaaaaaah!"

"He would've been split in two right~?"

"Yeah, as expected of Kuraudo! That guy isn't even worth his time!"

"Get him!"

Disturbance and bewilderment. Expectations and excitement. There was a change in the energy of the cheering party of both sides. But Ikki didn't have the time to pay any heed to that.

"...I see, so that's it."

Because he happened to realize it. An unthinkable possibility which was in the corner of his mind ever since Kuraudo dodged Ikki's first perfect counter. But that worst possible possibility was in actuality, reality.

"So this is your real power, which defeated the Last Samurai."

Part 5

"There's been one thing I've been concerned about since I heard how Kaito-san was defeated by Kurashiki-kun two years ago from Ayatsuji-san. Why was Kaito-san defeated so one-sidedly? Even if he was ill, he was someone who grasped for the crown in the world of swords, the Last Samurai. The battle would never be that one-sided at his own court. There had to be a suitable reason."

And that was the factor Ikki noticed about Kuraudo's strength.

"And I've now confirmed that."

Evading and defending against attacks that had almost absolute perfect timings. Disappearing like haze and attacking from a completely different angle. All of these were the fruit of one certain ability.

"What are you talking about!? Is there some kind of trick!?"

Ayase immediately pressed at the topic. For her, this might be the answer to why her father was defeated so one-sidedly two years ago, a truly important matter.

Did Kuraudo use some kind of trickery? But Ikki denied that.

"No, there's no deceit nor trick."

"Haha, seems like you've noticed…. Say it, I'll match the answer."

Kuraudo, who had a large grin, asked to reveal the true identity of his power that Ikki had managed to see through.

"It's something Kurashiki-kun got directly from his roots: reflexive sensitivity."

"Reflexive… sensitivity…."

"Ikki, that… isn't that the same normal reflex gear all humans have?"

"That's half right, half wrong. If put into words then it would be that, but the efficiency, and speed are all too great. I'm talking about the time it takes for a human to complete the sensory process, as in 'sense', 'comprehend,' and 'respond'. For the most part, it's point three seconds for us. They say a professional sprinter has a time of point fifteen seconds. And no matter how much you train, this number can't cross the bounder of point one seconds. That is common sense. However… for Kurashiki-san who just dodged that counter, it seems like the time for him is point zero five seconds or lower."

""—!?""

Stella and Ayase became speechless at that fact. Well, it was obvious to be surprised. The reaction time for Ikki and Stella was about 0.13 seconds. Kuraudo's senses had long crossed the human boundary. In other words, the time it took for Ikki and Stella to perform one action, Kuraudo could do about two or three actions in that same amount of time.

"And with that common sense defying reaction speed, he can dodge our attacks that might seem absolutely impossible to dodge with perfect timing, or he can change the direction of an attack just before it clashes with ours and make it come from a completely different angle. The reason why his sword seemed to vanish halfway was because of that."

"Haha… hahaha… HAHAHA! BINGO!"

Kuraudo widened his eyes while laughing madly.

Yes, his sword wasn't an art. It was pure violence. And with that violence, the Sword Eater tramples all down.

Because reaction speed was the base of all sports and actions. No matter how much one trains, or how much one polishes his stance;

it doesn't matter how much experience one has, it all becomes meaningless before it. No matter how much of an absurd surprise attack is thrown at him, he can deal with it after seeing it. No matter how someone charges at him recklessly, he can change his guard after seeing that. It allowed something irrational like seeing the opponent's choice of rock, paper, or scissors before making his own: that was the true value of the Sword Eater.

Techniques and experience, schemes and tactics, a nightmare that renders all of these useless. Superhuman reflexes, and reaction ability born from that, adding the two and thus creating *Marginal Counter*.

"You're the first one to see through my Marginal Counter on the first meeting! I'll commend you, Worst One! As I thought, you're the best. But so what!? Even if you know how it works, can you do anything about it?"

"...."

Hearing that, Ikki's expression clouded.

Yes. His Perfect Vision was meaningless before a rock, paper, scissor game where the opponent could see his move beforehand. And Ittou Shura only fortified his physical abilities and not the transmission speed of his brain. In other words, it was exactly as Kuraudo said. Ikki had no method of tearing through Marginal Counter.

"Haha. You can't, can you. My Marginal Counter isn't an 'art'. It's a special trait. I didn't cheat and stuff.... And just this ain't the limit of my Marginal Counter!"

Saying that as if howling, he attacked. And what came towards Ikki was an attack as if it was aiming for two areas at the same time!

"*Hebigami*[3]!"

As if biting it, the swing by his right hand attacked both the left and right side as if biting in. A phantom like that, unrealistic as it may be came in with ridiculous vigor and speed which was impossible to defend against, attacking both sides at the same time.

Even if he managed to defend against one of the attacks, the other would just rip him apart. Then he had only one thing to do. Ikki used all his strength to leap backwards and tried to evade it. Being a twofold attack didn't matter if he just escaped it's range.

"There's no way I'd let you do the same thing twice riiiiight!?"

Orochimaru's blade extended and immediately chased after Ikki. There was no longer any meaning in distance. The saw blades came in from both left and right and intersected on Ikki's body.

—But right at that moment, Ikki took action. With a clang, the sound of two blades clashing reverberated and sparks containing mana flew out. With *Intetsu* which Ikki had in his right hand, he repelled the *Orochimaru* coming from the right. But that was… a mistake! Ikki's reflexes weren't fast enough to be able to block the second attack coming from the left! The saw blade coming from the left struck his body!

The saw blade ripped off the flesh from his body which flew in the air, and blood spilled on the floor dyeing it red… that was supposed to happen.

"What?"

But that didn't happen. What spilled wasn't blood but sparks. Why? The answer was in Ikki's hand which defended against Hebigami.

"You—!"

After noticing it, Kuraudo raised a howl. Ikki wasn't gripping the hilt of <Intetsu>, but the base of the blade and thus intentionally reduced his reach.

"That's right, kodachi[4] techniques…! As expected of Ikki!"

"Kurogane-kun can use a kodachi?"

"He can even teach Shizuku who has a kodachi-shaped device, so of course he can use it!"

Ikki hated teaching wrong things to others, knowing that nature of his, Stella was convinced. And her guess was correct. Ikki wasn't only well versed in swordsmanship, he was also proficient in archery, grappling, unarmed, and many others. Even if it could only raise his strength on a minuscule level, he desperately practiced it and used all the time his body would allow to pursue those methods. Because he was well aware of the fact that he was weaker than anyone. And he was now bringing out everything he had learned back then.

The fact that was able to discern the position of the Hunter after being struck by his arrow was also a result of that. That was true for his display of defense and offense in this match too. Because of the shorter reach, the kodachi had less offense, but since it could be rotated faster, the blocking ability rose. Ikki, utilizing that defense, deflected Kuraudo's godspeed attack.

"It means that you're not the only one who can change his reach."

Ikki, after defending against Hebigami with *Intetsu* immediately stepped in and started the counter.

"Haha."

Kuraudo laughed after seeing Ikki challenge him, despite that fact that Ikki had already witnessed his overwhelming attack speed. Even though this was just one exchange, for a mage-knight who relied heavily on mana, this was once in a lifetime decision. Kuraudo commended Ikki for that. But—

But you can't win. Not with just this.

It was skilled of him to suddenly switch to a kodachi technique. But in the end, the reach is still short.

—So he'll teach that guy. As one of the best eight of the whole country. As someone who resides at the summit of the Seven Star.

Strength isn't just gorgeous sword techniques that enchants people. Strength isn't some burning feeling you have when you fight for a friend,

It's something simpler; it's something far more dreadful. There's just one fixed answer to that.

—It's just simple overwhelming violence.

"HAHHAAAA—!"

"Wha-!"

For a moment, Ikki including those who were watching, Stella and Ayase were at a loss for words. The snake-like attack that was released at Ikki after he stepped in to counter attack—it had four heads! An impossible four-fold attack!

He can still go faster—!

A complete surprise attack. But Ikki didn't lose his cool and blocked the attack, coming to sever his head and to attack his left flank, with kodachi technique.

However it wasn't enough. Kuraudo released four attacks at Ikki instantly. Ikki could only block two. The remaining two slashed at Ikki's chest with a cross.

"Argggggh!"

"Ikki!"

"Kurogane-kun!"

"…I-I'm fine, I can still fight."

A large amount of blood was spilling. The wound probably reached the sternum. But Ikki still poured power into his knees and refused to give up. He continued to gaze at the opponent before him.

"Oh! You avoided a fatal wound by using the momentum of the first and second hits to move backwards. Crafty ain't ya…? But that all ends now!"

Kuraudo extended his *Orochimaru,* that was now dyed in fresh blood, like a whip.

"What can you do from that distance? I'll turn ya into mincemeat!"

He attacked from a distance where only he could take the offensive, and slashed at the wounded Ikki.

Part 6

At first when Ikki blocked *Orochimaru*, Ayase thought that he could definitely win this. When he deflected Hebigami with kodachi technique, she thought 'He can do this!' But each time, Sword Eater just rose even higher. He jumped over every one of their expectations and hypotheses. Like a nightmare.

The current Ikki could go head to head and win against every last one of the current festival candidates at Hagun. He was the Crownless Sword King who even defeated the Crimson Princess without sustaining a single wound. Even that Ikki—

He can't do a thing… even in close range.

Perfect Vision lost to Marginal Counter. With Ittou Shura, Marginal Vision left all the actions useless after the initial dash when using that, so there's no meaning in using it. Rather, it could be fatal if he used it carelessly.

Ittou Shura was something Ikki used by utilizing all his resolution and determination. If he tried it while at his wit's end, he would end up burning all his power. He couldn't stop half way, nor could he do minuscule regulations like holding back and extending the time limit a bit. And if an opponent who could make two to three actions in the time he could make one go fully defensive, defeating that opponent in just one minute would be nigh impossible.

He's completely… out of options….

All he could do was keep defending against *Orochimaru* and Hebigami while standing on top of the puddle made of his own blood and bear that deep gash. A completely one-sided battle.

Ayase gulped while biting down her lips and seeing the figure of Kuraudo continuing his barrage on Ikki.

…Strong! This man, he can't be defeated!

So this was the national level! In the best eight of the last festival, this was the real strength of Sword Eater.

Are there such monsters at the summit of the Seven Stars…!?

She couldn't see victory. No way out was visible. He trampled down all tactics and techniques sent at him while mocking.

Before that, Ikki kept getting hurt as time dragged on. He kept defending against *Orochimaru* and Hebigami time and time again with his acute observation and kodachi techniques which were dulling as time went on, and the number of strikes he couldn't dodge or defend against increased. And each time that happened, the saw blade chipped away the meat on his arms or thighs.

At this rate—!

An ominous déjà vu. The sight of Ikki refusing to stay down even after being injured to such an extent overlapped with the sight of Kaito two years ago.

"—!"

Ayase could no longer bear it.

"Vermillion-san! Please stop this match! At this rate, Kurogane-kun will break!"

"If I stop it now then you won't get this dojo back you know."

"I don't care! Kurogane-kun is more important!"

"That's true. …But still, no."

Ayase was shocked at the words from Stella, who was watching her lover be chipped apart little by little while having her arms crossed under her breasts like it was nothing.

"Why!? Aren't you his girlfriend!? Then how can you say that!? Or is there some kind of way to turn this situation around!?"

"—No way. If it was me I could've restricted him with my flames, but Ikki doesn't have that option. He doesn't have a method to attack from that distance. And on top of that, his only way of attacking, his defense and offense in close range as a swordsman, he can't do that from that distance.... The situation is quite hopeless I guess. Honestly, I didn't think that skull guy would be so strong."

The replying Stella was serenity itself. But looking closely, her fingernails were piercing into the white skin of her crossed arms. A drop of blood smudged on her uniform. She's enduring it, the urge to dash out right this instant.

"The label of best eight in the country isn't a joke, I have to admit after seeing this. That man is strong. At this rate Ikki is going to lose."

"I don't get it...even though you understand all that why aren't you stopping him!?"

"There's no way I can do that."

"Why!?"

"Because Ikki... he looks like he's having so much fun."

"Eh?"

Ayase looked at Ikki, thinking, what the hell was Stella saying? And she was hit by shock.

He's... laughing?

Ikki had a smile on his face. And it wasn't the usual kind and innocent smile. As if a beast baring his fangs.

"Come to think of it, he was smiling like that when facing my Katharterio Salamandra."

"W-Why? Even though he might be killed? T-There's so much blood... why?"

"Isn't that because it's so fun?"

She couldn't understand. She wasn't yet… at that level. But, Stella understood. And probably, her father did too.

"…Hey Sempai. After hearing your story, there was one thing me and Ikki just couldn't figure out. We just weren't satisfied."

"Weren't… satisfied?"

"Did the Last Samurai really sink into regret?"

"…H-Huh? What are you saying? That, isn't that obvious!"

Ayase suddenly became excited at Stella's unexpected words.

"If only, if only that guy didn't appear, then we would still be living peacefully! My father wouldn't have fallen into a coma! Our dojo wouldn't have been stolen away! The pupils wouldn't have to be hurt either! That guy, he destroyed our peaceful daily life! That, of course Father had regrets!"

"But that's nothing but Sempai's subjectivity right?"

"Wha—!"

"Just try thinking about it a little. A man who once wanted the crown in the world of swords, he was even called the Last Samurai because of that absurdly high ambition… a person like that, would he truly be happy in a life where he couldn't even use his sword, and would decay as an instructor? Is it really a daily life he would want to continue forever? —If it was me, then I definitely wouldn't be able to bear it."

"—!"

"Certainly, the nuisance of the fight is undeniable. And the methods that skull guy took to challenge your father wasn't commendable at all. But, there was a person who would go that far just to challenge your father…. As a swordsman, isn't this something to really be glad about?"

No way…. There's no way that's possible. After all, Father was always smiling. He would take care of the pupils with kind eyes, and pass off his sword to the next generation—

「This is my battle! Don't interfere!」

"—!!!"

At that exact moment, something inside of Ayase, something that has been loose for a long time fell into place perfectly with a click. And then, she understood everything.

During that fight, the reason why Kaito looked so dreadful, and why he sounded so much like a wild demon that even Ayase had never seen or heard him like that, when Ayase tried to stop the duel. Why he intended to continue the duel with that obvious outcome.

She hadn't realized it till now; she hadn't realized Kaito's true feelings.

For so long, she had thought that Kaito accepted a duel he didn't want to forcefully, and was defeated full of regret.

But, that's wrong! Absolutely, wrong!

Certainly, he had intended to fight for the pupils that were injured. He wanted to fight to protect the place his daughter lived in.

However, that wasn't everything!

The fuel that drove Kaito back then, it had been a feeling far simpler than decorum or morals, it had been far more pure.

He wanted to fight.

He wanted to fight the opponent before him.

He wanted to defeat the amazing guy before him.

It was just the simple natural instincts of a wild beast to fight. Because that fight was, for Kaito-san who was ridden with illness, a moment he had always yearned for. He desired it even if his soul should burn away, a single moment of passion.

…Aaah… so that's it.

—Sorry.

That word, it wasn't something he said to us.

If it's now, she could understand. Those words were not aimed at Ayase or the pupils; he said those words to Kuraudo. No matter what the reason, there was a boy willing to challenge a illness-ridden fossil of the past like him. But he failed to show him everything of the Ayatsuji single-blade style. So he was asking Kuraudo to forgive the weak him.

…Really, that old fool.

To actually speak the words that might as well be his last words to his enemy. She always thought of him as a more intellectual type of person. But what? He turned out to be an astonishing egoist! Almost like a boy who just hates to lose.

But… still.

…Then was my father… happy in the end?

At that moment, a loud and conspicuous clang rang out through the hall.

Part 7

The loudest clashing sound till then suddenly rang out, and the hall fell into silence.

"Haa, haa! Haa!"

In that silence, Ikki was panting roughly. The blood loss from the countless wounds he sustained greatly drained his energy. But—Ikki wasn't the only one who was panting.

"Ugh! Haa, haa, haa."

Even though Kuraudo hadn't received a wound yet, he was also breathing heavily. The battle seemed to be completely one sided, but why was he almost exactly as tired as Ikki?

The answer, Stella immediately figured it out.

"That's it! So that's the weak point of Marginal Counter…!"

"Eh? What are you talking about Vermillion-san?"

"Just carefully look at the face of the skull guy, you'll understand."

Being told that, Ayase looked at Kuraudo's face. He was sweating a lot, and from his chin, drops of sweat were pouring down as if overflowing.

"…I see! It's his stamina!"

"Yes. It's quite simple now that I think about it. That overwhelming common sense-defying Marginal Counter of his boasts higher action counts, but in return the stamina consumption is really harsh. Ikki immediately realized that and played for time while sustaining the minimum amount of injury he could, in order to bring down his stamina!"

As if confirming that, Kuraudo suddenly gnashed violently.

Damn mimic…! This was supposed to be going with my pace, but before I knew it I got caught in that bastard's game of endurance!

Even though he was half dead and could barely hold his sword, he immediately saw through the weakness of Kuraudo's Marginal Counter and drew him into his own pace. As a result, Kuraudo's energy was almost completely exhausted.

Yes, it's exactly as Stella said. Ikki wasn't the type of guy to just quietly sit around while he was being attacked. In his arsenal, there were many methods to wear out his opponents.

Almost like witchcraft… what an annoying bastard.

Kuraudo got the chills when he tried to think of how many layers of planning this simple attacking and blocking match had.

On the other hand, Ayase was full of admiration for Ikki.

"As expected of Kurogane-kun! He can even do that from a place where his swords don't reach the opponent! If it's this, then he might be able to win…!"

But when Ayase was swinging her fists in happiness with the possibility of a turnaround, Stella showed a severe expression.

"…Maybe, maybe not."

"Eh? What do you mean?"

"This game of endurance was his last card. He didn't have any other options as he couldn't change the distance at all. That's all. And Ikki is also out of stamina. He is way past his limit. In a protracted battle, the possibility of him losing is higher."

It was just something he did as a last resort in that hopelessly disadvantageous situation. So it wasn't something that had much merits for this side. The only thing that could be said was—

"Well, no matter who loses and who wins… the next blow will probably be the last."

That was the only truth.

"…This bastard… there has to be a limit to stubbornness…!"

"Haa, haa… unfortunately, I really hate to lose…. And… it's been a while since I've been thrown around this much…. It's so fun… it would be a shame to just end it."

"Haa… haa… haa… fun, is it? Hahahahaha! You too huh, you're pretty much screwed up in the head, too!"

"…That, I could say the same about you…!"

"…Yeah, but it's time to end that too."

Kuraudo corrected his breathing, and straightened his back. And he brandished *Orochimaru*.

"The next will bring you down."

He declared that to the warrior covered in blood, standing before him. With the next strike—he'd kill.

And accepting that death challenge, Ikki happily raised the ends of his lips.

"—Yeah, that's right. I was thinking that too."

He aimed the black blade before his eyes, pointing the tip directly at Kuraudo's chest. The two knights exchanged the pledge of bringing a certain death to each other, and then—

"Lastly, can I ask something?"

"What?"

Before ending the match, Ikki asked something he had to hear from Kuraudo no matter what.

"The great sword master that we both long for… was he smiling just like how we are right now?"

At that question, Kuraudo's eyes suddenly turned wide.

"…Haha, don't ask something so obvious."

He replied as if spitting it out.

"There's no damn way that someone who is called the Last Samurai wouldn't enjoy an exciting death match as fun as this one."

"…Is that so."

He wanted to know that. And he wanted the answer to be that as well. That's why, Ikki said it.

"Thank you."

He dashed out while baring his fangs.

Part 8

While spilling blood from the many cuts across his body, Ikki jumped out with a short posture.

His red-dyed body was half dead, half alive. But the speed of that dash right now was the highest since the start of the battle, almost like a gale.

What a ridiculous bastard!

Kuraudo didn't feel rueful when commending that Ikki. Then, he should also throw away all hesitation. He decided to pour all his soul into the next attack, and shrank *Orochimaru* to the size of a one-handed sword.

Shrinking the reach, but prioritizing the speed. A full speed attack containing his all. Utilizing the full of Marginal Counter, an ultimate technique that only Sword Eater could unleash!

"*Yamata no Orochi*[5]—!"

A full power attack. And at the same time he swung the sword; eight heads appeared as the attack! Dimly glowing in a bone-colored radiance, the eight headed serpent assaulted the dark haired knight while baring it's fangs.

Ikki, who couldn't stop the four-fold attack, couldn't possibly stop this. He would be murdered without a doubt.

But, even though that was a fact. But still!

The Worst One didn't stop. Without a shred of hesitation, he dashed towards the coming eight-headed serpent. With the blade positioned parallel to his eyesight, and with the tip pointed directly at Kuraudo's chest, he jumped forward without any intention of defending.

Was it self-abandonment? Was it a random frenzied attack?

Wrong!

…No! This is—

From the blade positioned parallel with his eyesight. And from the depths of the pair of eyes that released a blinding radiance. Kuraudo felt a chill as if his whole body was being cut apart.

He knew this. In the past, there was a moment where he felt the same sensation. That was, during the match with Ayatsuji Kaito. During the very last moment. At that time, the almost dead Kaito was trying to do something. Just like the current Ikki, he had his sword positioned like that, and he jumped forward abandoning all defense.

Kuraudo had always pondered what that was until today, that feeling. But he certainly felt it right at that moment, that sensation.

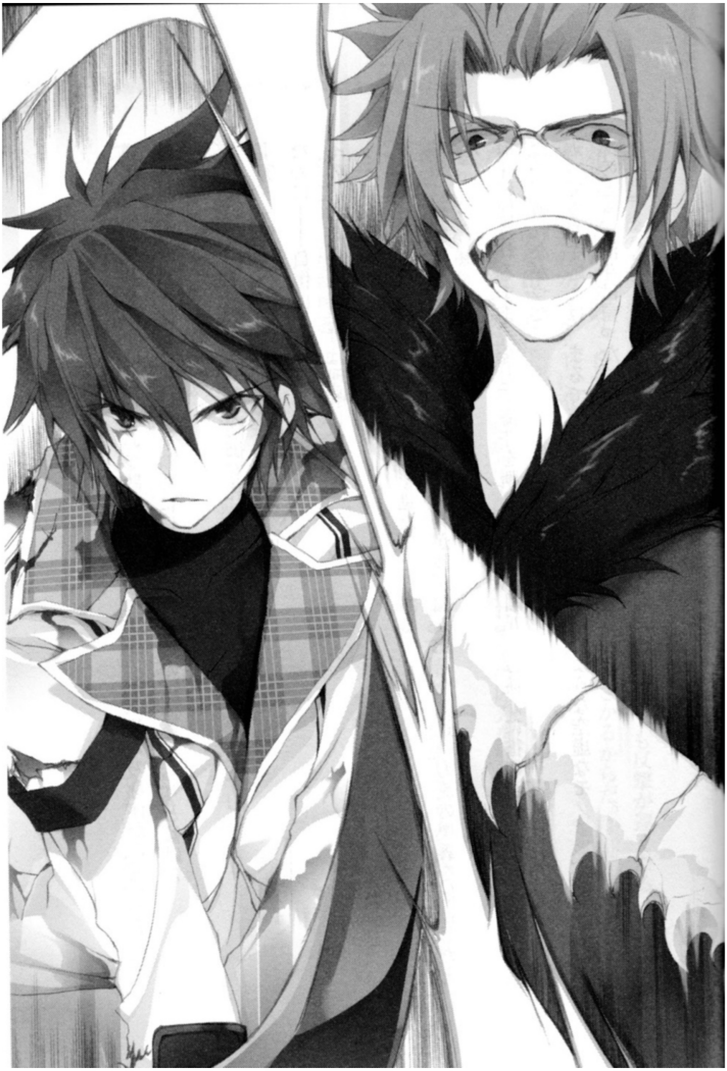
Danger.

From a man who was half dead, a man who could collapse any moment, he felt an unreasonable fear that well up from his very depth. And right now, it was the same—and exactly because so!

Interesting!!!

Kuraudo didn't stop his sword. Even at this very moment, he could evade with his Marginal Counter. But still, he didn't! He faced it head on!

Of course I will…!!!



Kuraudo always longed to see this. He wanted to see the continuation of that duel, even though he thought it was no longer possible. Maybe, just maybe Kaito might recuperate. Maybe Ayase would also master the sword completely and come to challenge him.

With that marginal wish in mind, he had always waited at this place. That was why he wouldn't stop. There was no reason for him to stop.

"It was worth the wait! These two long years—!!!"

Immediately after, their two figures intersected, and fresh blood flew in the air.

Part 9

The splash of blood that rose so high that it reached the ceiling—was Kuraudo's. There was a massive slantwise gash on his huge built body, starting from the right shoulder till the end of the lower left abdominal area.

And as for Ikki, he sustained no wounds.

Why? Yamata no Orochi was something that didn't allow defending nor evading. In truth, Ikki took on the eight serpent fangs with his body. But why was he unharmed?

The reason, Ayase understood it immediately.

…N-No doubt… that's….

In the past, Ayase had witnessed this technique just once. When Ayase decided to enter Hagun Academy, it was the secret technique of the Ayatsuji single-blade style her father had shown her.

At that time, when Ayase attacked her father with *Hizume*, she certainly did hit his body. But, she wasn't able to cut him. The response, it was as if he was cutting the sakura petals dancing through the air. Her father said this—

—A counter-attack will be delayed if one uses the blade for deflection in order to perform an interception.

Because whenever one shifts the enemy's sword to evade, then one's own sword will also shift from the place he wants to attack a proportional distance. Then what should be done in order to perform a perfect counter?

Kaito's gave an answer to that question. All one had to do is take the opponents attack with one's body and ward it off without shifting the opponent's sword along with the place one wants to attack.

A peerless stance to evade the enemies attack by taking the most minimum possible movement, dispelling everything of the material world while feeling every physical existence around.

"Ayatsuji single-blade style final secret, Ten'i Muhou[6]!"

But why was Kurogane-kun able to use it? Even Kaito only used this top secret technique in front of her once, so why—

"—Ah."

Then she remembered something Ikki had said at that family restaurant.

"It's all because of Ayatsuji-san's hard work. Even alone, I think you would have noticed it, you would've reached that secret when the time's right."

Ikki never says anything he isn't sure of. Ayase who had directly received his training knows of his sincerity the best.

"No way, did he already know it then…!"

"Blade Steal."

"Eh?"

"Ikki's sword style. He's able to steal even the deepest secrets of a sword style after observing it. This happened in my case too."

Yes, at that time, Ikki had already seen through the Ayatsuji style. The destination where Ayase's sloppy sword, a sword that was training desperately to chase after her father's back, would reach.

Confirming that, Stella showed a delighted look. Because she knew that this was Ikki's true dreadfulness. He wasn't satisfied, even though he had so much power. Stocking on power and techniques even if it would help him only a little, and using it, in order to reach a new height. That unstoppable ambition is what makes the Worst One the Crownless Sword King. That was the true essence of Kurogane Ikki, the Crimson Princess's lover.

"...God, that's a man worth chasing after, really."

Stella muttered that in an amazingly low tone. But at that moment,

"—AAAAAH!"

Something that no one there could believe happened. Kuraudo, while bearing that obviously fatal wound howled like a mad beast and sustained his stance, refusing to let his body fall. The huge amount of blood flowing from his wound formed a blood puddle beneath his feet. But even so, Kuraudo didn't let his knees bend, and he didn't admit defeat.

He's still standing!

At this, even Ikki couldn't hide his surprise. But—

"...I see. So this is what that old mister wanted to use then."

There was no fighting spirit harbored in Kuraudo's eyes.

"Haha... Awesome...."

As if yearning for the battle that occurred here two years ago, he laughed cheerfully. And then, he once again turned his attention towards Ikki after lifting up his blood-dyed body.

"Worst One—your name?"

"Kurogane Ikki."

"Kurogane... We'll continue this at the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival."

Saying that, he headed towards the exit of the dojo. It seems like he no longer had the intention to fight. Guessing that, Ikki asked—

"Kurashiki-kun, this dojo—"

"Do whatever you want. —Cuz there's no reason for me to wait anymore."

That was his answer.

"W-Wait Kuraudo!"

"Hey you guys! We're leaving!"

"Y-Yeah!"

His lackeys followed Kuraudo one by one and left the dojo. And just when their figure completely vanished,

"Whoa! Get a grip, Kuraudo!"

"This is bad, he's completely lost consciousness!"

"Someone hurry up and call an ambulance!"

"Wait a bit! I'll drive us to school."

"Kurauudo! Hang on—!"

Their panicked voices echoed from the distance.

Ikki banished his *Intetsu* with a sigh, though there seemed to be some admiration dwelling in that.

"Not letting his enemies see his weakness.... He's surprisingly stubborn too."

"Just like you right?"

"Uwaah!"

Being suddenly pushed back, he fell on his backside.

"W-What are you doing, Stella!"

"Don't go spouting that pretentious stuff while you can't even stand."

"Uuu."

Certainly, the current Ikki couldn't even stand up again, let alone walk. Because he was found out, he averted his face with a pout.

"You noticed…."

"Of course! Jeez, getting beat up like this every single day! If you had that awesome technique then why didn't you use it sooner!"

"Don't ask for the impossible. It's the secret attack of the great Last Samurai. There's no way I could use it without prior preparation. If I didn't wear out Kurashiki-kun to make his sword attacks go a bit dull, then I would've been turned into mincemeat."

"Then at least try to avoid those injuries a bit more!"

Sighing, Stella tossed her bag at Ayase.

"Sempai, I brought a first aid kit just in case, can you please stop the bleeding? A girl from a dojo like you should be able to right? In the meantime I'm going to call a sensei and meet up, we can't get on the train all covered in blood like this, can we?"

"Y-Yes, I got it!"

Replying, Ayase took the bag. Inside, there were many first aid materials like bandages, disinfection liquids and so on. Before Stella finished calling the school to get a car, she should be able to complete some of the treatment. Ayase steadily beginning the treatment, and while doing so….

"Kurogane-kun. …Thank you."

She tightly grabbed Ikki's hands and gave her heartfelt gratitude.

"Because of you, I think I've finally understood what my father really felt…. I thought I was the one who understood him the most, but looks like I didn't understand him at all."

"That's not true."

"Eh…?"

"The reason I was able to win today was thanks to the fact that Ayatsuji-san was able to perfectly remember Kaito-san's teachings. I don't think, other than Ayatsuji-san, anyone else could've done that. You understand him the most. Because, you are the Last Samurai's successor."

"…."

Was it really so? Ayase didn't know that for sure. But she, certainly, prayed for that to happen.

"Then, I'll have to get stronger. Strong enough so that I can proudly call myself his successor, strong enough to beat that boy myself."

Ayase's eyes were no longer clouded like they were before. She probably will never again lose her way. Because she had found a place for herself, a place where she was proud to be.

Ikki showed a relieved smile at this Ayase.

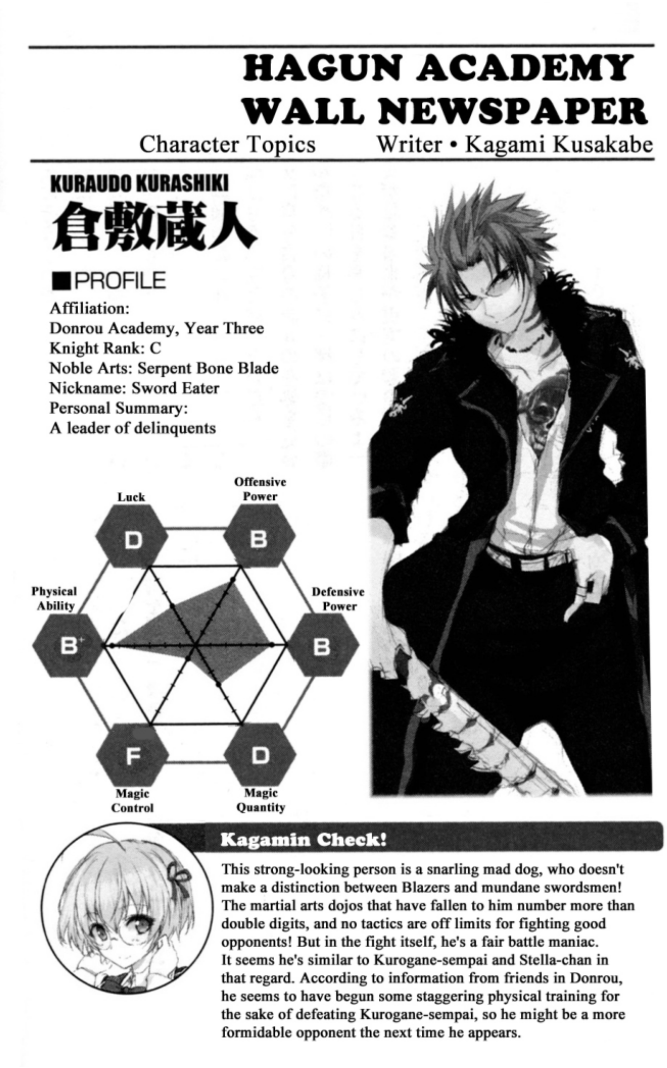
"I'll be looking forward to it."

He prayed so that the wish of the girl would one day come true.

References

1. ↑ *Shinkirou*, 蜃気狼: "Mirage Wolf"
2. ↑ *Orochimaru*, 大蛇丸: "Great Serpent Curl"
3. ↑ *Hebigami*, 蛇咬: "Serpent Bite"
4. ↑ *Kodachi*: A small sword, a short-length katana.
5. ↑ *Yamata no Orochi*: An eight-headed, eight-tailed dragon of Japanese mythology.
6. ↑ *Ten'i Muhou*, 天衣無縫: "Heaven-Clad Null Shroud"

Epilogue: Glacial Smile



HAGUN ACADEMY WALL NEWSPAPER

Character Topics Writer • Kagami Kusakabe

KURAUDO KURASHIKI

倉敷蔵人

■PROFILE

Affiliation:
Donrou Academy, Year Three
Knight Rank: C
Noble Arts: Serpent Bone Blade
Nickname: Sword Eater
Personal Summary:
A leader of delinquents

Kagamin Check!

This strong-looking person is a snarling mad dog, who doesn't make a distinction between Blazers and mundane swordsmen! The martial arts dojos that have fallen to him number more than double digits, and no tactics are off limits for fighting good opponents! But in the fight itself, he's a fair battle maniac. It seems he's similar to Kurogane-sempai and Stella-chan in that regard. According to information from friends in Donrou, he seems to have begun some staggering physical training for the sake of defeating Kurogane-sempai, so he might be a more formidable opponent the next time he appears.

Part 1

『Off Campus Duel! Sword Eater, the Ace of Donrou Crushed by Worst One!』

The very next day after the duel, a newspaper plastered with an article titled that was spread around. There were even photos of the duel taken secretly. The one to write the article was none other than the new Newspaper Club's Kusakabe. She first suspected it after hearing Ikki and Ayase's conversation during the selection match. So the next day, she tailed the three of them, including Stella.

「For a journalist, this level of stalking skill is a must!」

That seemed to be the case. And Ikki could only click his tongue since he didn't feel a shred of her presence even once during everything that happened.

This article was also a big blow to Hagun. Of course, since the opponent was the ace of another school, even if it was an off-campus duel, it couldn't possibly be a fluke against one of the whole country's best eight. Even the guys who still harbored a bit of doubt didn't have any choice but to shut up and accept Ikki's abilities.

And somewhere among all of them, someone asked this—

Who is stronger? Hagun's strongest, the current student council president Raikiri [1] Toudou Touka or the Worst One?

No one knew where that question came from, but that question sparked a fire in the students of Hagun Academy. Raikiri is among the best four! Of course she's stronger. No, if it's Worst One then, he might be able to beat her. No way. Yes way. No. Yes!—

Arguments like that broke out through campus and by the time a week had passed, everyone wished for the answer badly.

Part 2

A week after the duel with Sword Eater. It was evening. Ikki and Stella finished their daily training in the forest recess and were now resting on the bench, sitting side by side.

And during that, Ikki got a mail from Ayase, the contents—it said that her father, Kaito-san, had regained consciousness.

"Eh? Sempai's father woke up!?"

"Seems like it."

"What amazing timing."

"Yeah, Ayatsuji-san also seems to be surprised. Look here."

Ikki showed Stella the mail contents.

「Father has regained consciousness!!!!!!!」

"Wow, it's true. She's surprised all right! There are as many exclamation marks as there are Dr●gon Balls."

"Well, it's fine if she's lively."

Actually, after the duel that day, they hadn't seen Ayase even once. Because after that day, when they returned to school—

'I've made Kurogane-kun do everything this time, so I'll at least decide what to do from now myself.'

Saying that, she went to the selection match executive committee and confessed that she had cheated on the match. Because of Oreki-sensei's intervention her expulsion was avoided, but her entries in the selection matches were all deleted and she was suspended from school for 7 days. That was why Ikki was glad to find out she was still doing well despite all that.

"But since her father woke up, it'll be hard for her to return to school."

"Yeah...."

Because he had been in a coma for two long years. His body was probably very weak. The rehabilitation would be tough, that's for sure.

Besides... he has a cardiac disease. Ayase should also want to spend a bit more time with him.

"She won't come to practice anymore will she?"

"...It's a bit lonely."

"But it can't be helped."

Rather, it should be a matter to be happy about, since Kaito finally woke up, even though the doctors were saying he wouldn't last till winter.

"It might be short, but I want those two to spend a meaningful time together."

"...Yeah."

As he prayed that with Stella beside him while looking up at the evening sky, his datapad suddenly rang out. Someone called him, and speak of the devil! It was Ayatsuji Ayase.

"Oh! Now she's calling directly. —Hello?"

"So you are Kurogane Ikki-kun. I heard about you from Ayase. I want you to marry her at once and succeed my doj—" **Bang**Ugh**

"What the hell are you doing? You just woke up after two years here! Sorry Kurogane-kun, the idiot said something rude. I called you because he wanted to say thanks but...."

"Hahaha! You don't need to hide it Ayase. You love him right? I mean Kurogane-kun. A parent can understand. When you were talking about Kurogane-kun you looked just like a wife talking fondly about her husband. Just like how your mother used to be!"

"Aaaaaaaah! Ahhhhh! Don't say something so weird—!!!"

"You don't have to hide it. Papa just woke up, so about you two—"

"Just sleep for another two years—!!!"

"Ugh— …Argh!"

"K-K-Kurogane-kun! F-Forget that! T-Talk to you later!" **Click** *—Beep-Beep-Beep—*

"…Well, somehow, it feels like Kaito-san will outlive all of us…."

"I was thinking the same thing."

But well—

"But somehow, everything feels resolved right?"

"Yeah."

The dojo was returned to Ayase, and Kaito also woke up. Ayase might not come to practice any longer so it was a bit lonely, but well, it wasn't like this would be the last time they saw her. The case about the Ayatsuji-dojo was full of ups and downs since the restaurant, but since it's calmed down that was good.

"But, it's a bit quiet now since we have one less person…."

"Rather, we're the only ones here."

"Well there's that too."

Today, both Shizuku and Arisuin were absent just like Ayase.

"That's rare, Alice is one thing but for Shizuku to be absent is…."

"Yeah… maybe she's tired."

"...That means... it's just the two of us... right?"

"...."

Stella interlocked her hands with Ikki's. She was looking up at him with hope, and ruby eyes that seemed to be harboring a slight fever. Ever since the pool, their relationship has become more like lovers, though it still remained platonic.

So signals like this, they were already going with it, both sides. Sitting on the bench, they closed their distance little by little and drew near each other.

"Stella...."

"Ikki...."

"Ikki...♡"

""Eh?""

Both of them suddenly turned around at that one extra voice.

"Smooch~ ...Eh? You're not going to kiss?"

It was Arisuin who tried to mix in with their kiss from the side.

""UWAAAAAAAH!!!""

And as for Stella and Ikki, they fell off of the bench almost instantly.

"A-Alice! W-What are you doing!"

"Oh no~ With that passion, I was thinking if we could do a threesome~"

""NO WAY IN HELL!!!""

"It's a joke, a joke~♪ Aww~ Both of you were red, it was so cute~ Ahaha."

Was their reaction just that weird? Arisuin had tears in the corner of his eyes and had a big smile. "But still, Big Sis is surprised~ Closing your distance like a hedgehog… so slowly, could it be that you're still green—"

"W-W-We haven't gone that far!!!"

"Ah, is that so? But that's some fast progress. Now you can flirt with each other so well."

"…Rather Alice, you noticed that we were dating?"

"Well, yeah, somewhat. But I confirmed it today~♪"

"Ugh…."

Stella showed a bitter expression. Arisuin was a sociable character, so he was popular among both the girls and boys. So if they were found out now, it might get bad—that was probably what she was thinking.

Isn't there some way to fool him? Stella was complaining with her gaze.

No, but that's impossible now. But if they properly explained the situation, then he might keep it a secret. So he decided to confess everything to Arisuin.

"Hey Arisu, about this—"

"I know, be at ease. I don't plan on telling anyone."

Arisuin might've guessed their situation on his own. He put his index finger before his lips and winked. As expected of the person who even made that human-hating Shizuku open up, he knew how to handle humans.

"I'll just enjoy it from a special seat~♪"

Is what it felt like. He should be kicked by a horse.

"Damn, it was a mistake to be found out here, but I guess Shizuku not being here is fortune within misfortune."

"Right. By the way, have you seen her, Alice?"

"Yeah. I was just late since I was playing UNO with the fans but Shizuku said she'd be training on her own today."

Training alone....

"Oh, that's strange. For Shizuku to not be with Ikki. And at her own volition that is."

"Yeah, she's probably preparing herself.... Her next opponent is an opponent this time."

"Huh? Her next opponent has been decided?"

"Oh my, you guys don't know?"

Does Stella know? Arisuin looked at her but she denied it. Of course, Ikki doesn't know either.

"Alice? Who is Shizuku's next opponent? And what do you mean her next opponent 'is an opponent'?"

Ikki asked, worried. And Arisuin showed a difficult expression.

"She's the strongest.... The number one of this academy."

Part 3

At the same time, the sixth training arena.

It was used as an arena from twelve o'clock until five in the afternoon during the selection matches, but after that it was used as a training area for battle royals that anyone could use.

Of course they would use Illusionary Form. It was different from lessons and without any hard and fast rules. So people who didn't take part in the selection matches also participated. For that reason, sounds of battles bustled out throughout the arena every day.

But today was different. It was complete silence that ruled. The heat of a battle couldn't be felt either. Only the absolute zero atmosphere could be felt that overpowered the sixth training arena.

Well, of course that would be the case, because—

"W-What the hell's with her…."

"Monster…."

Because every last one of the knights who battled here had turned into ice sculptures.

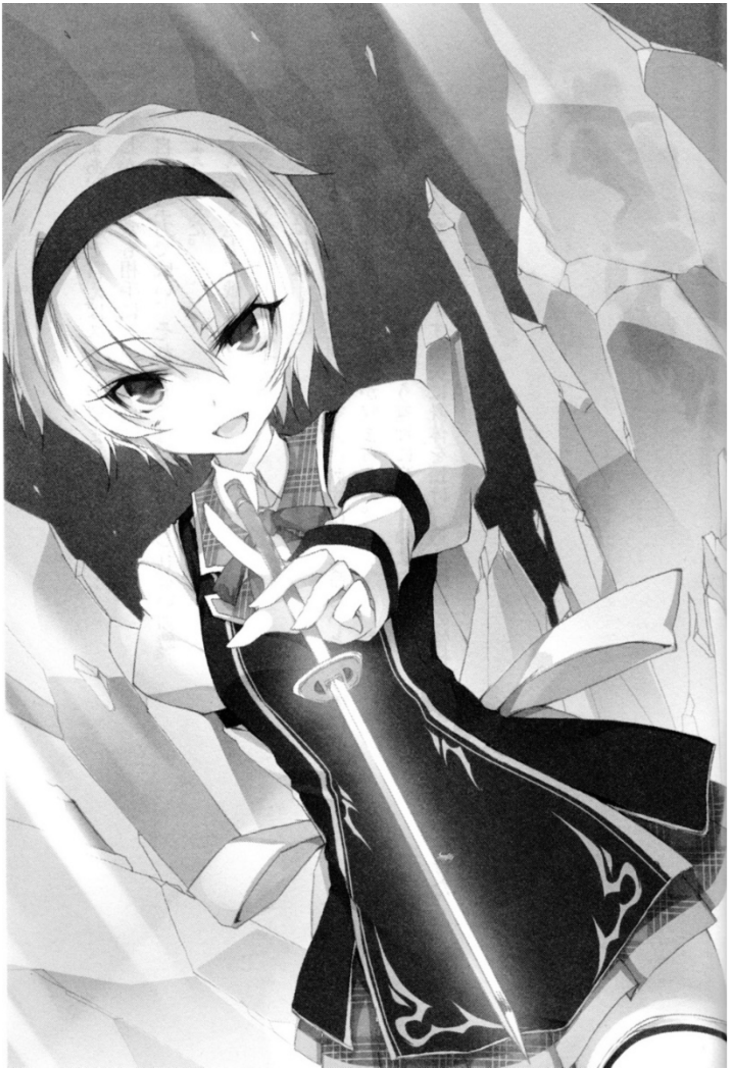
"She actually… took out fifty people… all alone…!"

In the audience, a student spoke with a shaken voice. The meaning of his words could be traced back to ten minutes ago.

A first-year came to the training grounds and said this to all that was present: she wanted to face all of the people there alone.

The ones who received this ridiculous challenge were all feeling admonished, probably.

But the result…? Total annihilation. Not a single one of them could touch her. The only one who stood there was—'Lorelei' Kurogane Shizuku.



"Not enough…."

She sighed while viewing the frozen prairie she had created. She thought that if she fought with fifty of them, it'd at least become some practice but, it wasn't enough at all. Was Hagun really of such a low level? This much was just stressing it.

"…However, you are not going to disappoint are you?"

She looked down at her datapad. On the display was a mail from the executive committee notifying about her next opponent. It was the number one of Hagun and in the national top four from last year.

「The opponent for Kurogane Shizuku-sama's tenth match has been decided to be Toudou Touka, third year class three.」

Finally! Shizuku had a weirdly mesmerizing smile on her face.

She could finally stop fighting while holding back, taking care not to end up killing her opponents. This farce was finally ending.

She wanted to fight an opponent where she could go all out. She had been thinking that for a long time.

This kind of thing, I wonder if it's like Onii-sama.

Well, if it was ambitions then it'd be closer to Stella…. But, as an opponent Todou had no shortcomings. She was an opponent whom she had to fight with all her strength in order to win.

At last.

At last she could fight with all her strength.

At last she could break someone down with all her strength.

"Fufufu, ahahahah!"

Even though the surrounding temperature was so cold it pierced the atmosphere, she could not stop the explosive excitement coming from within her. No, if it was a fever she couldn't cool down then it's better not to try in the first place.

Shizuku continued to laugh, as if entrusting her body to the passion of the battle to come.

References

1. ↑ *Raikiri*, 雷切: "Lightning Cut"

Afterword

Thank you for reading the second volume of *Rakudai Kishi no Eiyuutan*.

Misora, the author here.

The humid summer has finally ended. Has everyone spent their summer well? Misora has collapsed though. He collapsed on the roadside. It's hyperthermia's fault.

The cold sweats won't stop. And my body keeps shaking so it's quite a mess. Luckily there was a hospital nearby and somehow after getting there, I collapsed in the waiting room. So, saved! Somehow. But to think I'd increase the count of the rumored hyperthermia I've been hearing about on the news.

I think it's better for people who go out for a long to drink sports drinks rather than tea. Eh? It's already October? That doesn't matter. It's not important.

Well then, about the book right? Volume three will be the climax of the school selection battles. With the selection matches reaching their end, along comes the battles of higher order.

The appearance of the Hagun Student council president.

The crafty tricks of the Kurogane house, who are making a move.

Rivals and old enemies, two decisive battles at the same time.

Will Ikki be able to win his last match and win to the ticket to participate in the Festival?

Please read the 3rd volume of this in-school sword action series with pleasure. I thank all of those who have helped me write and publish this book.

"Please rip the clothes near her tits in the front cover!”—I think I'll be able to reciprocate to this weird order. Won-san is a god! Thank you for the treat.

And I am also grateful to the readers who have stuck with this book. Really, thank you very much.

Well then, let us meet again in the 3rd volume.